COLLIN WILCOX

THE PARIAH

A LT. FRANK HASTINGS NOVEL

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THE PARIAH

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° *Frank Hastings Novels*

COLLIN WILCOX

THE PARIAH

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This book is
dedicated to the
memory of my mother
who was a one-of-a-kind person

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THE PARIAH

1

Earlier in the day, in the afternoon, he'd walked this way, rehearsing. Already, he'd learned the importance of rehearsal. When he was only a child, watching his father—listening, learning—he'd been aware of the importance of knowing what would happen—when—how—in precisely what sequence. So that, now, he was walking without looking.

Yes—walking without looking . . .

It was necessary, absolutely essential, that his eyes make contact with no one, with nothing. Because the eyes were the windows of the soul, revealing everything: two tunnels, leading straight to his essence, deep within himself.

Everything, the trivial and the monumental, the good and the evil, came through the eyes, into the brain, deep into the brain, then into the soul, deep into the soul, his father's playground: sight into sensation, translated into substance, flesh acting on flesh, good battling evil, the eternal struggle.

Past into present, day into night, all of it focused here, now, inside himself, sensation into sight, translated into action, good struggling against evil, God's eternal struggle.

The hotel entrance was behind him. Without looking, without revealing himself, he knew the broad steps leading up to the ornate brass doors were behind him, three shop fronts behind. The corner was ahead. He was aware of the intersection, without revealing his awareness. That, too, was essential. Deliberately, he'd not allowed the names of the two streets that formed the intersection to register on his conscious. He'd learned the

importance of that, too—of keeping the surface of his mind absolutely smooth, utterly unblemished, therefore invulnerable, good and evil in equilibrium, rendering him safe. Absolutely safe.

Because sidewalks, streets, intersections, all of them carried the feet, the legs, the bodies—the faces.

And the faces carried the eyes.

And it was the faces, registering or not registering, that could betray him. Their faces, and their eyes—nothing else could harm him but their eyes. He knew that now, knew how the eyes could find any blemish on his consciousness. Then they could look inside, see beneath the surface of his consciousness, look straight through the two twin tunnels to the center of his soul.

It was logical, a logic that only he possessed. Therefore, it separated him from the rest of them, left him free, accountable only to God.

At the corner now, he was allowing himself to turn to the right. His footsteps, he knew, were synchronized to the rhythm of those around him. This, too, was essential. They must never know, must never suspect, that he was walking among them. Because if they knew, then they could guess his mission.

And God would forsake him, leaving him helpless, exposed—surely dead.

Another corner was approaching. This was the crucial intersection, the last right angle remaining. He would turn left, and then begin walking slowly, steadily straight ahead. And because he'd already done it, walked this way earlier, he was no longer compelled to think about it. Instead he could concentrate on the moments to come, focusing his essence on the task before him as he listened for the words that he knew were coming, instructing him.

And, yes, he could feel it beginning. Through the traffic sounds, above the cacophony of voices surrounding him, he could hear the commands: God's will, materializing in words, slowly taking shape, thickening, words that would soon guide him, displacing his own thoughts, his own desires, his own fears. He could feel it beginning, the miracle that would set him free.

But he mustn't look. He must not allow the full, focused force of his essence to slip beyond constant, conscious control, therefore dissipating the force field that would draw her to him, a helpless captive of his dominant essence.

Because if free will was compromised, vengence was denied. It was a given, divinely ordained, as certain as eternal judgment.

Ahead, another intersection was coming closer, a third waypoint, the final guide. He'd known—he'd heard—that it would happen here, must happen here, between the second and the third—

"—about a date?"

The words released him. Therefore, if he chose, he could look at her, make his decision, leaving himself free to speak.

She was dressed in a skintight purple sweater, red plastic miniskirt, black stockings, red plastic boots, spike-heeled. She carried a large black handbag slung over her shoulder. Her eyes were magenta-shadowed, her full lips were painted red. Her skin was black.

There was, therefore, no need to speak. No longer seeing her, he could move on, gathering to himself his essence, God's decree, his shield, invulnerable.

"Hi . . ."

It was a soft, unevenly spoken word, hardly more than an exhausted whisper. The face, too, was exhausted, its skin pale, almost translucent The blue eyes were sunk deep in darkened sockets. The painted mouth was defeated, twitching as she said something meaningless, the obscene litany of her trade.

Without looking at her, he knew he could see her, therefore knew that, yes, he'd found her.

Dancer Browne yawned, rotated his head, flexed his shoulders, adjusted the volume of the Cleo Lane tape. On a warm September evening, sitting in a white-on-blue Continental that still smelled new, listening to his favorite singer, parked in his favorite parking place, The Dancer was aware that, at age twenty-seven, he had it all. The Continental was paid for, the new sergeant on the Tenderloin beat was coming around, and

IBM was up more than forty points on the year. Dancer's new girl, Jill, only nineteen, the daughter of a Milwaukee doctor, was earning more money than any of Dancer's other girls, after less than a month in the life. He'd found her in the airport, sitting on her suitcase, frowning as she studied a map of San Francisco. One look into her eyes and Dancer saw dollar signs. It was all there: the anger, the defiance, the urge to self-destruct. He'd taken her home, bought her a twenty-dollar dinner and a hundred-dollar pair of boots, given her a fifty-dollar toot and shown her around his circular bed. A week later she turned her first trick.

Five more like Jill, and he could retire.

But five more like Amy, working just across the street, and he'd be old before he turned thirty. From the first, he'd known Amy would cost him. Junkies always cost him. By now he should have learned. Like tonight. It was already ten o'clock, and Amy hadn't scored yet. And tonight, he'd promised himself, was the big one—Amy's final exam. If she didn't score, turn a profit for him, she was out. He'd shoot her up, load her into the Continental and take her down to Stockton, to Jerry Holmes. Jerry would know what to do with her.

As Dancer watched, Amy was moving into the glare of Teddy Parker's FIGHTING GIRLS sign. She was hitting on another one: a man in his middle or late twenties, medium tall, dressed like a tourist, dark blond hair, empty eyes, pale, blank face. This one had stopped, at least, and was listening to Amy's halfhearted pitch. Close by, Jill was coming out of the Bayside Hotel; already she'd turned three tricks, even on a slow Tuesday night. When Jill talked to them, they listened. Dancer looked at his watch, yawned again, adjusted the balance on the stereo. Cleo's voice was like fine, mellow wine, like a woman's fingertips soft on his bare skin. She was—

Across the street, Amy was scoring, moving the tall young trick out of the light from the sign, toward the Bayside. To Dancer, the trick seemed like an odd one: the way he looked, frozen-faced; the way he moved, like a stiff-legged, arm-locked zombie. But he was going along, letting Amy lead him inside the

hotel. The Dancer nodded, mentally added another fifty dollars to the night's cash flow: twenty-five for Amy, twenty-five for him.

As he walked behind her down the narrow, dimly lit hallway, he was aware of the gathering force, an invincibility so certain that the sights and sounds that surrounded him were fusing into a single aura of the eternal celestial presence, his invisible cloak, his invincible protection from evil, his armor against temptation.

Because the Devil was here, lurking unseen in this hallway of hell, crouching behind the door just ahead, where she was stopping now, stooping, fitting her key to the lock, allowing the door to swing slowly inward, revealing the cavern of depravity beyond.

Yet, if the Devil was here, God was here, too, on guard, guiding the placement of his feet upon the threadbare carpet, positioning the angle of his hands, the inclination of his head, the rotation and counterrotation of his head, his torso. Because God had entered the interior of his brain, and was touching His fingertips to the brain's countless synapses, those millions of switches that controlled his thoughts, his feelings, his eternal destiny.

Still his vigilance must be constant. Because the Devil's fingers could find the synapses, too. Once it had happened. Now, just about now, it had happened, as he was passing through a door like this door, entering a room like this room, preparing himself for God's call, listening for the tiny voice of command.

And listening, too, for what she would say, also commanding him: "How's this?" she asked, gesturing to the bed as she placed her oversize handbag on the bureau. "Okay?"

He knew that he was nodding. Did she expect him to speak? Didn't she realize that, should he speak, contact would be shattered, leaving him helpless, a prey for the Devil?

Of course she realized. They were so incredibly diabolical, scheming to save themselves, twitching, turning, laughing, smiling. Didn't she realize that only he could offer salvation once she'd surrendered?

No, she didn't realize.

Of course she didn't realize.

So it was essential that he smile. Once. Just once. One smile, one nod. No more was permitted.

"Just drop the fifty in the handbag, okay?" She gestured. "It's open. Right?"

Lowering his eyes, he saw the fifty-dollar bill held between thumb and forefinger—his thumb and forefinger, guided by God's fingertips, on the synapses. Yes, the money was dropping into the open maw of the handbag, itself an obscenity. Now, turning, he willed his eyes to focus on her face, only on her face. And, yes, he could see that they were beginning: he could see it in her face, the beginning of the final rites.

"So what'd you want to do?" The painted face twisted into an obscenity of a smile; the eyes leered, the mouth taunted him. "Time's passing, you know." The unclean smile widened. "And time's money. Right? Money, and fun, it's all the same. Right?"

It was important now, overwhelmingly important, utterly essential that his words reach her without his actually speaking. Because God controlled him now. God's mind, God's will—God's hands on the synapses. Controlling him.

And, yes, listening, he heard. It was God, speaking with his voice. A miracle:

"Turn around. Don't look at me. Just turn around."

Indifferently, she shrugged, mutely moving her thin shoulders. Soon, she would have died, a victim of the streets she prowled. Without salvation, fallen from grace, she would have gone to eternal damnation, unsaved.

Did she know?

Did she feel the presence, acknowledge the divine power? Salvation was coming closer, saving her from eternal fire. The power was palpable now, enfolding them, a single aura, pulsing with the power. In his hands, upraised, the instrument of salvation would materialize, the means of liberation.

"Stay like that." Yes, the voice was his: calm, steady, commanding. "Just like that."

"Whatever . . ." Once more, indifferently, she shrugged.

Now, still with upraised hands, himself a supplicant, he took

the final step forward. It was the moment of touching, the decisive moment, the moment upon which all else balanced. He must touch his body to hers, must master the obscene sensation, must liberate mind from body as his will merged with God's cosmic consciousness . . . Now. Finally, unequivocally, incredibly now, his body upon hers. Enabling him finally to close his eyes, awaiting the delivery. He could hear her voice, but the words were lost in the roar of the cosmos. He must remain like this, controlling this moment of final grace, suspended between heaven and earth, eyes closed, hands raised, fingers extended—awaiting the touch of God's fingers upon his, delivering the instrument.

One breath of eternity . . .

And another breath—the final, eternal breath.

And, yes, as his eyes opened, he saw it in his hands: the instrument, a length of miraculous golden cord, his gift from God.

"Hey. What the fuck you—"

The rest of it was lost in a gurgle of sound as the cord disappeared from sight. Her body had gone wild, writhing against his. He must close his eyes now, witnessing with his body her passage, allowing himself this one moment of animal response, purifying the liberation of her body, taking its corruption unto himself, his sacrifice. To accomplish it, her body must slacken as his slackened, together, his final gift to her—

—finished.

With God as his witness, finally finished.

2

"You want anything from the machines?" Culligan asked. "Coffee? Anything?"

"No, thanks," Canelli answered. "I'm not drinking coffee anymore after ten o'clock at night. Besides, the more you read, coffee's no good for you. My dad, you know, has heart problems. And the doctor said, right after cigarettes, cut out the coffee. So I figure, what the hell, I might as well—"

On his desk, the telephone warbled. Waving to Culligan as the other detective left the squadroom, Canelli lifted the receiver, punched the blinking button."

"Homicide. Inspector Canelli speaking."

"This is Bernie Penziner. Hi."

"Oh, hi, Bernie." Canelli's broad, swarthy face softened into a sly smile. "How're you enjoying the Tenderloin beat?"

"I didn't know when I was well off. Safes and Lofts might be boring, but this is the pits, down here. I mean, it's a goddamn zoo."

"So what's doing? I don't suppose this is a social call."

"There's a dead hooker at the Bayside Hotel. It's at Mason and—"

"I know where it is." Canelli leaned forward, put a paperweight on an unfinished interrogation report. "I was there . . ." He frowned, calculating. "It was less than six months ago, I bet it was, that I was there. Another hooker, in fact."

"That's because there's nothing but hookers at the Bayside. They rent rooms by the hour."

"Anyone in custody?"

"No."

"Any suspects?"

"No."

"Any idea how long ago it happened?"

"Not long, I would say. I touched her. She was warm."

"Okay. I'll turn out the troops, and come down. What's the room number?"

"Three twenty-five. Shall I stay here? In the room?"

"Just make sure it's secure, any way you want to do it. I'll be there in a half hour or so. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Jesus, what a business. First I'm bored in Safes and Lofts. And now I feel like I'm going to puke all the time. Every year, I say I'm going to quit, take early retirement. Every goddamn year."

"I used to say that, too. But I don't anymore. And I'm not even thirty, yet."

"Hmmm . . ."

Canelli parked the cruiser beside a fireplug, scribbled "Bayside Hotel, Rm. 325" on his card, put the card on the dashboard, locked the car and began making his way along the crowded sidewalk. He was a big, lumpy, diffident man who moved more like an amiable tourist on vacation than a policeman on duty. Ahead, he saw a squad car pulled up in front of the Bayside Hotel. One of the uniformed men sat in the car, monitoring the radio; the other stood beside the entrance to the hotel. Recognizing the man on guard, Canelli smiled, waving a beefy hand.

"Hi, Fergie. How's it going?"

"No complaints, Joe." Answering Canelli's amiable smile, the patrolman pushed open the hotel door and stood aside. The door was all metal, with a single small, wire reinforced window at shoulder height. The red-painted BAYSIDE logo beneath the window was badly chipped. Inside, the lobby was less than twelve feet wide, with a narrow flight of stairs at the far end. An unevenly lettered NO CHECKS, NO CARDS sign was tacked to the Formica counter that guarded the stairs. Sitting behind the

counter, as high and as hostile as a precinct sergeant, the muscular black desk clerk glowered at the shield Canelli offered for his inspection.

"Your other guy's upstairs," the black man grated. "Third floor."

"There'll be others along," Canelli said. "Technicians, and guys from the coroner's office."

Without moving, without changing expression, standing with his big-knuckled brawler's fists braced wide on the counter, the desk man nodded. "I know how it goes."

"How long you been on duty?" Canelli asked.

"Since nine o'clock tonight."

"You work regular here?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. You hang around. Don't go anywhere without you talk to me."

"I'm on till six. Where'm I going?" The blue-black lips twisted into a weary cop-hater's sneer.

Penziner had taken a straight-backed chair from a vacant room and was sitting in the hallway. One uniformed man stood beside the door to 325, another stood at one end of the hallway, beside the staircase. From one end to the other, the hallway was lit with a line of red bulbs. Seeing Canelli, Penziner got to his feet.

"A half hour exactly," Penziner said. "I'm impressed."

"You want to hang around?" Canelli asked, "or would you just as soon go?"

"I'd just as soon go. I already told you, this doesn't agree with my stomach, all this. Especially the goddamn smell."

"No problem." Canelli took a notebook and ballpoint pen from the pocket of his tan windbreaker. "What've you got for me?"

"Her name was Amy MacFarland. I never talked to her, never busted her. She was from out of town, though, I know that. But that's all of them, out-of-towners, runaways."

"Who's her pimp?"

"A black guy named Dancer Browne. He was parked right across the street when I got here, cool as shit."

"Will he stay put?"

"Oh, sure." Penziner's long, lean face registered grudging admiration as he said, "Dancer's—what—the king of Mason Street. He went to San Francisco State for a couple of years, on a basketball scholarship. He's tall, about six five. And smart, too, smart as hell. He only works white girls—four, five of them. He won't run anywhere, take my word. He's got too much going on here."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing. I'll ask around, though, see what I can turn up. She came in with a trick, I think. So it's probably him that did it."

Canelli nodded, pocketed his notebook. "Keep in touch, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. See you, Joe." Penziner nodded and walked down the garishly lit hallway to the staircase. Canelli drew a deep breath and turned to face the door of room 325. He would make his preliminary examination, then call the duty lieutenant.

3

On the TV screen, the president was making hard eye contact with the camera at the conclusion of a rebroadcast speech that had warned of Communism's new menace to the Western Hemisphere. Sitting beside Ann on their living room sofa, Hastings yawned, lifted his arms high above his head, flexed his fingers, then touched Ann on the forearm. She turned, smiled at him.

"How about some hot chocolate?" she asked.

"Fine. I'll put the garbage cans out."

"The newspapers, too."

"Right." He watched her as she got up, switched off the TV, walked to the archway that opened onto the long hallway leading back to the rear of the large Victorian flat. She wore faded blue jeans and a plaid cotton shirt, shirt-tail out. Her long tawny hair was fastened in a pony tail. Ann was a quiet, reserved woman, and she moved accordingly: firmly, self-sufficiently, economically. Literally from the first moment they'd met, her body had excited him. She'd been dressed as she was dressed now, in jeans, with her hair in a pony tail, wearing no makeup. It had been the same time of night, too: a little after eleven. Dan, her teenage son, had been a material witness in a homicide, and briefly a suspect. With his shield in his left hand, Hastings had pressed Ann's door buzzer with his right hand. Then, reflexively, he'd stepped back, unbuttoned his jacket, put his right hand on the butt of his revolver. When the door opened, he'd—

In the hallway, the telephone rang. Quickly, mindful of Ann's two sleeping sons, Hastings rose, went to the phone.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Lieutenant. It's Canelli."

Automatically, Hastings noted the time as he clicked a ballpoint pen over the notepad that was always beside the phone He was about to go on duty.

"What's up?"

"It's a dead hooker down on Mason Street, at the Bayside Hotel, in the three hundred block. It happened a little after ten o'clock, according to the way I get it. She was strangled. All I got is a general description of the guy that probably did it. They came in a little after ten, like I said. Maybe ten minutes later the guy left, through the lobby."

"Is the crew there?"

"The ME's here. McCarville. Our lab guys haven't showed up yet. I figured—you know—a hooker, it's no big deal. So I didn't put the rush on them."

"Okay, I'll be down in forty-five minutes or so."

"Right."

Hastings cradled the phone and turned to face Ann, who stood in the doorway to the kitchen. They'd been living together for a little more than a year. Already, she'd gotten accustomed to the phone calls that could come on Hasting's duty nights. Or, if not accustomed, at least resigned.

"The chocolate's almost ready," she said quietly.

"Good. I'll just have time."

As he stripped off his rubber gloves and straightened over the body, McCarville winced, pressing both hands into the small of his back. McCarville was a small, trim, middle-aged man, totally bald, nattily dressed. As he turned to face Hastings, he grimaced.

"The last time we met like this," McCarville said, "it seems to me I was complaining about my back then, too."

"No better, eh?"

"Worse, I think."

"Do I ask if you went to a doctor?"

The grimace twisted into an expression of long-suffering patience. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Well . . ." Hastings gestured to the dead woman. "What's the word?"

"Pretty straightforward," McCarville answered. "She hasn't lost any internal temperature, which means she's been dead two hours or less. Without doubt, she was strangled by something like a coarse rope, maybe three quarters of an inch in diameter. Just eyeballing her, I'd say she was in her twenties, in poor health, probably malnourished. And, yes, she had needle marks on both arms and both legs." Spreading his hands, he shrugged. "And that's pretty much it. The autopsy might hand you some surprises, but I doubt it." He gestured to the room's open doorway, where a gurney waited. "Want us to take her away?"

Hastings looked inquiringly at Canelli. "Have we got everything? Plenty of pictures?"

Canelli nodded. "Plenty."

"Okay—" Hastings stepped back, standing with Canelli beside the double bed. Briskly, the two coroner's deputies entered the small room, spread a green plastic sheet on the floor, rolled the body onto the sheet, used black elastic straps to secure it. The gurney was brought in and lowered. Grunting, the two deputies squatted, nodded to each other, heaved the body up.

"Light," one of the deputies said. "Less than a hundred, I'd say."

As Hastings watched the deputies wheel the body out into the hallway he looked at his watch. The time was ten minutes past midnight. Elapsed time: two hours since someone had come up to this room with Amy MacFarland, quietly closed the door, and killed her.

Or, more accurately, the murderer had probably snuffed her. For an extra charge, she'd probably let him play with the limits. She'd gambled with her life, and lost. Poor Amy MacFarland. She probably wouldn't even get an obituary in the next day's newspaper.

"So what've we got?" Hastings asked. "Who've you talked to?"

"Just the room clerk," Canelli answered. "And it was a zero, what he had to say. He claims he didn't even notice the guy when they came in. Her, he remembered. I mean, that's his job, to keep track of the hookers, keep track of the money. But the tricks, he claims, they all look alike."

"Do you believe him?"

Canelli's swarthy moon face registered brow-furrowed concentration as he considered. "Well, if I had to say yes or no then I guess I'd have to say yes. I mean, what's he got to lose, giving us a description of the guy?"

"What about her pimp?"

"A guy named Dancer Browne. Bernie Penziner—he's on the Tenderloin beat now—he told Dancer to stay available. He's parked just down the block, in a big white and blue Continental. God, he's some character. I mean, these pimps're all—you know—cool. But Dancer, he's supercool."

"I'll talk to him. Is he black?"

"Yeah. Tall, and black. He used to play basketball at State, according to Bernie." Canelli smiled. "How about that—an athlete, down here pimping."

"I'll see what he says. You stay here—" Hastings gestured to a lab technician who was leisurely dusting a badly chipped bureau for fingerprints. "Make sure it all gets done. I'll be back in a half hour or so."

"Yessir."

Hastings stooped, pressed his shield against the Continental's passenger window and knocked on the glass with his free hand. Behind the wheel, Dancer smiled, lifted a forefinger in a with-it salute, and leaned across to open the door.

"I'm Lieutenant Frank Hastings. Homicide."

"Hey—" The lazy smile widened, registering a special pleasure. "Hey, I know you. I saw you on TV, not too long ago. Didn't I?"

Deciding to ignore the question, Hastings half turned in his seat to face the other man. On a warm September night, The Dancer was wearing the obligatory two-hundred-dollar sports

shirt opened deep at the neck to reveal an ebony chest festooned with gold chains. Both his hair and his beard were close-cropped. Behind designer glasses, his eyes were expressive, constantly in motion. His mouth was mobile. His manner was completely relaxed, utterly assured.

"Tell me about Amy MacFarland."

"Oh, yeah . . ." Dancer sighed heavily, gravely shook his head. "It's terrible, these crazies."

"She was one of your girls."

Observing the conventions, Dancer frowned, elaborately puzzled. "How do you mean, 'one of my girls'?"

"I mean that she worked for you, turning tricks."

Dancer's full lips curved into an amused smile. Allowing a small silence to lengthen, he took time to assess the other man: about forty years old, give or take. A big, muscular man, one of the quiet ones, a man who would think first and then hit—hard.

Continuing the mandatory pattern of ritual responses, Dancer spread his hands, pantomiming an aggrieved innocence. "I just don't know what you mean, Lieutenant. No idea."

"You're wasting my time, Dancer. I was getting ready for bed when this call came in. Don't jerk me around. I'm not in the mood."

Judging that the time had come for plain talk, Dancer asked, "So what're we talking? One on one?"

"That's how we're talking. I don't care who you're running, where your money comes from. That's between you and Vice, whatever you work out. But I've got a dead body, and I need a suspect to go with it. I want some answers—now. Then I want to go home and get some sleep. Clear?"

Eyes veiled, Dancer smiled. Yes, he and Hastings could work together.

"You know how it goes, Dancer. It's the hard way or the easy way. Your choice."

Nodding acceptance of the terms, Dancer spoke quietly, concisely: "She came to town about four months ago, I guess it was, from New York, so she said. She was a junkie—had been, for a year or two, I'd say. So I—you know—tried to make it a

little easier for her, put her in touch with some people." He shrugged. "That's about it."

With his notebook on his knee, Hastings asked, "Where'd she live?"

"I don't know." Saying it, Dancer met the other man's eyes squarely, signifying that, really, he was telling the truth. "I mean, she moved around a lot. All I know, she'd show up down here, whenever she felt like it. She'd just—you know—see the car, and we'd talk. Then she'd go about her business."

"How much did she charge?"

"Fifty. Hopefully."

"What about tonight? Tell me about tonight."

"Yeah—" He nodded, once more made full, complete eye contact. "Well, I was parked just a few spaces up, on this side of the street." As the other man pointed, Hastings caught the sparkle of a large diamond on his little finger. "And I happened to see Amy, across the street, there—" He pointed again. "She was—you know—hitting on the tourists. She hit on maybe three or four, but didn't score. But then, after a while, she connected with this guy. They talked for a minute or so, not long, and then they—you know—went into the hotel, there—the Bayside. And that was it, pretty much."

"What time was this?"

"Just about ten, I'd say."

"Describe him, the trick."

"Yeah, well, that was interesting. I mean, they were talking right in front of a sign, so I got a pretty good look at him. And I remember thinking he looked weird. I mean, his face was a blank, you know. Just a real pale blank, with these empty, stone eyes."

"How old was he?"

Dancer shrugged. "Twenty-five, thirty, maybe. No more."

"How was he dressed?"

"Like a tourist, I'd say—just your standard out-of-towner."

"Was he wearing a tie?"

"No, no tie. I didn't pay much attention, though. But I

remember that he wasn't wearing a tie. Maybe he had a—you know—a polyester sports jacket, like that."

"How tall?"

"Medium. Five ten, maybe. Slim."

"Hair color?"

"Blond. Dark blond, maybe. Regular cut." He shrugged again. "A tourist, like I said. Just your standard tourist from New Jersey, looking for some action . . ." Dancer paused, looked across the street, toward the spot where he'd last seen Amy MacFarland. "Except for those eyes," he said thoughtfully. "They were strange, those eyes. Spooky."

"You'd recognize him again." It was a statement, not a question.

Dancer looked at the big, quiet spoken lieutenant, the man with the calm, hard eyes. They'd made a deal, the two of them: the standard deal. If he cooperated, he'd earn points—for himself, for his girls, money in the bank.

But identifying someone—going public, downtown—that was never part of the standard deal. Never.

"I'm not talking about a lineup," Hastings said. "Nothing like that. Nothing downtown."

"Ah . . ." Dancer nodded, tried not to reveal the relief he felt.

"But if we turn up anything, I'll want to run him by you." As he spoke, Hastings opened the passenger's door. "You weren't planning to leave town." It was another statement: flat, cold, businesslike.

Dancer smiled. "Man, I haven't left this town in years. I haven't left this *block* in years. You want to find me, here I'll be."

"Good." Hastings nodded, got out of the car, crossed the street in the direction of the Bayside Hotel.

Sitting on the double bed, Canelli watched the last of the lab technicians leave the room before he dropped his eyes to the outline of Amy MacFarland's body chalked on the stained carpeting. Seated in the room's only chair, Hastings was also

looking down at the outline. Slowly, somberly, Canelli shook his head.

"You know," Canelli said, "it's sad when you think about it. I mean, here's this girl—" He gestured. "For all we know, she could've been a—a bank president's daughter, or something. But no matter, she probably had parents who loved her, and everything. So then she starts in with drugs, and probably her folks threw her out, or whatever. So this is the way she ends up—her, and thousands like her. But the hell of it is, no one really cares. You know?"

Hastings nodded, then shrugged. "Nobody ever said life was fair, Canelli."

"Yeah—" Vehemently now, Canelli nodded. "That's it, Lieutenant. I mean, if this was the Fairmont, or somewhere, there'd be photographers and reporters, and . . ." He sighed, shook his head, studied the body's outline with soft brown eyes. Then: "It's like you say. It's just not fair."

Heavily, Hastings rose to his feet. The time was almost two, and fatigue had suddenly overtaken him.

"If you're trying to make me feel guilty, Canelli, you aren't succeeding. I'm going home, and I'm going to sleep. And after you lock up, I'd advise you to do the same. I'll see you at the office tomorrow morning. About ten, or maybe a little later."

4

Sitting slumped behind his desk, Hastings was staring with unfocused eyes at an interoffice memo outlining Chief Dwyer's new guidelines on overtime policy for nonuniformed personnel when the intercom button lit up. Wearily, he lifted the phone.

"Hastings."

"Yeah, this is Peirce, Lieutenant. There's a Mr. Draper here, to see someone in Homicide. Walter Draper. He's with the FBI, from Washington." After a short pause Peirce added, "Lieutenant Friedman just left for court."

"Okay, give me five minutes, then send him—no, *bring* him in."

"Right."

Walter Draper was a dapper man of medium height and weight, stylishly dressed, with prep school manners and a small, fastidiously trimmed moustache. He was about thirty years old, slightly balding, dressed in a pinstriped suit, white shirt, and regimental tie. Moving smoothly, precisely, he sat in Hastings's visitor's chair, arranged his trouser creases and smiled. It was a small, tight, tactical smile, slightly condescending.

"I'm sure you're busy, Lieutenant Hastings, so I'll come right to the point." As he spoke, Draper took a business card from his vest pocket and snapped it down on Hastings's desk. The card identified Draper as an assistant supervisor, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C.

"I'm with the Joint Task Force on Non-Causal Related

Crime." Draper paused, looking expectantly at Hastings. Yes, Hastings had heard of the task force, seen the flyers from Washington, one of dozens that crossed his desk each week. But, no, he couldn't remember what the task force was meant to accomplish.

"It's not registering, I see." Draper's voice was both tolerant and wearily resigned. Already, Hastings had consigned Draper to the nameless, faceless ranks of Ivy League FBI agents, one of hundreds he'd dealt with over the years Only once had he ever met an FBI man he'd liked.

Stifling a yawn, Hastings shook his head. "I remember the bulletins. But that's all, I'm afraid."

"For about a year now," Draper said, "we've been requesting reports from local jurisdictions on all current homicides—unsolved homicides thirty days old or more."

"Ah . . ." Hastings nodded. It was a responsibility he'd assigned to Richard Gee, the newest man in Homicide. "Right."

"What we're doing," Draper said, "is trying to see whether we can find any similarities between the victims, anything the computers can kick out for us."

Through the glass door of his office, Hastings saw two detectives standing expectantly in the hallway, mutely asking whether they could interrupt. Hastings moved his head a half inch, side to side.

"How's it going?" Hastings asked, returning his attention to the man from Washington.

"The computer is an incredible tool," Draper announced. "Unbelievable. I don't have to tell you that. They make matchups that would take clerks months to work out. We've been running this program for six months now, and it's amazing what we've turned up."

"What's the purpose of the program?"

Draper hesitated, then moved slightly forward in his chair, lowering his voice. "Actually," he said, "the goals are still classified. But, confidentially—" His voice dropped another half note. "Confidentially, we're trying to see whether we can get a handle on serial killers."

"Serial killers . . ." Interested, Hastings looked more attentively at the other man.

"It's a new approach," Draper explained, "a new concept. Up to now, we've been looking for connections between the victims and the killer. Which is tough going, as you know. I mean, the definition of a serial killer, after all, is that he kills at random. Usually there's no connection between the killer and the victim. None. Some guy gets in his car and starts driving—across the country, maybe. He gets drunk, or high, or his demons start acting up, or whatever, and he finds someone, and he kills him—or her. True, there'll usually be a common denominator relating to the killer's personality—he's a homosexual, and usually kills teenage boys, let's say. That gives us something to work on, but it's not a very good predictive tool."

Hastings frowned. "Predictive tool?"

"Some means of predicting where or when a serial killer will strike next."

"So what's your new approach?"

For effect, Draper allowed a moment to pass before he said, "We're trying to attack the problem from the other end, so to speak. The homosexual killer, for example. We know he goes after teenage boys. But the question is, what kinds of teenage boys? Blonds? Brunettes? Maybe he only gets turned on by boys with blue eyes—or boys who wear tennis shoes, whatever. Maybe not just tennis shoes, maybe it's Adidas shoes that turn him on. Or maybe one guy kills only when the moon's in the fourth quarter. He doesn't know that's when he kills. But the computer knows. And if the Adidas killer is also the one who kills when the moon's in its fourth quarter, then we're making progress. Not much progress. But some. Because we've got a two-way matchup, then, you see—a cross-check."

"Yeah," Hastings said, politely nodding. "I can see it."

"Some of the connections we're getting are pretty erudite," Draper continued. "For instance, prostitutes are obviously a big target group, for obvious reasons. And in Trenton last year, there were four prostitutes killed at one-month intervals. They were all black, all in their early twenties. They'd all come from small

towns in the South—and their fathers all worked for the civil service, in some capacity. And it turned out they were all murdered by the same guy."

"Are you telling me that he—" Hastings broke off, searching for the phrase, "—that he screened his victims?"

"No. Not consciously, anyhow. But subconsciously—" Draper spread his hands. The FBI man's fingernails, Hastings noticed, looked as if they were manicured. "Who knows?"

"Computers . . ." Registering polite wonderment, Hastings shook his head. "They're amazing. I guess we'll all be spending more time looking at the green numbers."

Decisively, Draper nodded emphatic agreement. "The programmer who set up the study told me that he used to work for an outfit called the North American Society for Cyclical Research, which was set up to predict the changes in the business cycle. And he says that the sales curve of junior misses ready-to-wear at Macy's corresponds exactly to the nesting cycle of the brown starling."

"The *brown starling*?"

Draper's answering nod was solemn. "The brown starling." He let a beat pass before he said, "Going back to prostitutes, that's why I'm here." He let another beat pass, compelling Hastings's closer attention. "Today is Wednesday. Beginning Monday, have there been any prostitutes killed in San Francisco?"

"As a matter of fact," Hastings answered slowly, "there *was* one killed. Last night, down in the Tenderloin."

Instantly, Draper's eyes came alive; his carefully cultivated image of the aloof FBI executive abruptly faded as he asked, "Last night? No fooling?" Eagerly, he came forward in his chair. Amused, Hastings nodded. Could Draper be another likable FBI agent, one capable of actual enthusiasm, the second likable agent he'd ever encountered?

"She was killed about ten last night. Why?"

"Do you have anyone in custody?"

"Ah, ah." Hastings raised a gamesman's forefinger. "I asked you first. What's the rundown?"

As Draper considered the question, caution veiled his eyes. "Lieutenant . . ." It was a pained admonishment. "I don't have to tell you that I can't give out information without—"

"Without checking with Washington. I know. Well—" Hastings smiled: a small, knowing smile. "Well, it's the same with me. I have to check with my people."

Draper eyed the man across the desk. Obviously, Hastings was an intelligent man, undoubtedly a competent officer: quiet, cautious, probably conscientious. Some ranking officers in the local jurisdictions, Draper had concluded, were thick-headed obstructionists: sidewalk cops promoted beyond their capacities, therefore insecure and envious when dealing with their opposite numbers in the Bureau. But Hastings talked like a man who'd gone to college—and graduated.

"You're, ah, the co-commander of the homicide detail," Draper said, offering a gambit. "Is that correct?"

Hastings nodded. "Correct. Pete Friedman and I—Lieutentant Friedman—we share command. He's in court today."

"So you really don't have to check with anyone."

"I have limited discretion." Holding the FBI man's gaze, Hastings allowed a long, measured beat to pass, then added meaningfully, "You have limited discretion, too."

For a full thirty seconds Draper stared out through the window at a fragmented view of the city. The time was 11:10 A.M. He was booked on a 7:15 P.M. flight to D.C. Conceivably, he could persuade the local bureau chief to contact Hastings's superior officer, probably the chief of detectives. The chief of detectives might go along, might order Hastings to cooperate, without demanding anything in return.

He might, or he might not.

Either way, Draper had a meeting scheduled in exactly twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes in D.C.

And if he could announce a break in the case, or at least a good, solid lead . . .

He returned his gaze to Hastings, who was calmly waiting for his answer.

"Okay," Draper said, his voice crisp, his manner brusque. He

took out a small leather-bound notebook, twisted the barrel of a Cross pen. "Let's have it. You first."

As Draper took notes, Hastings ran down the Amy MacFarland case, supplying all the facts, all the names, all the speculation. Only twice did Draper interrupt, asking for additional details. Ten minutes later, satisfied, Draper reviewed his notes, pocketed the pen and notebook.

"Your turn," Hastings said, drawing a notepad closer.

A last long moment of silence as Draper stared gravely across the desk. Finally, portentiously, he said:

"It could be that I'm going to give you a big one, Lieutenant. If that's the way it comes down, I hope you'll remember that you heard it here first—from me. Fair?"

"Fair."

"Okay." Heavily decisive, Draper squared himself in his chair, facing up to the bargain he'd made. "Here it is . . ." Another reluctant pause. Then: "Amy MacFarland fits the victim profile of a serial murder case we've been working on. She fits the computer model exactly. Right on the money."

Hastings decided his best tactic was simply to nod, waiting for the FBI man to continue:

"A little more than a year ago, in a period of three weeks, two prostitutes were murdered in Los Angeles. At the time, the two homicides didn't seem to be connected. And, let's face it, the police didn't exactly pull out all the stops when they investigated. But when we activated the task force, we went back over the data. And that's when the similarities began popping up."

"On the printouts."

Draper nodded. "Exactly. On the printouts. Both the victims were white, in their twenties. Both of them were murdered in hotel or motel rooms, where they'd taken a john. Both of them were strangled by a thick cord, or a rope. It wasn't robbery, nothing was taken. And there weren't any messages left behind. You know, 'Death to harlots' written in lipstick on the mirror, or whatever.

"So the information went into the computer," Draper continued, "which was programmed to pick up similarities in sex,

age, occupation, mode of death, probable weapon, whether robbery was involved, et cetera et cetera." Draper paused, reflectively shaking his head. "It's incredible, what these computers can do, matching things up. Unbelievable."

"So how does this come down to Amy MacFarland?"

As if he were ignoring the question, Draper went on, stolidly telling his story in sequence: "That was about a year ago, that the first two were killed. Then, about a month later—I'm not positive about the dates—another one showed up. In Cleveland."

"Cleveland?"

"Cleveland. And then one showed up in Los Angeles, then two in San Diego, if I remember correctly—then back to Los Angeles. And so on—for a year. One or two in different cities, but always back to Los Angeles—a total of fourteen, the way we figure it." A short, significant pause. Then: "Including Amy MacFarland, last night."

"The murderer is based in Los Angeles, and travels around the country."

"Exactly."

"So what's the rest of it? You said you were giving me a big one."

"What I'm giving you—" Draper paused again, allowing himself a moment of drama, building the suspense. "What I'm giving you is Austin Holloway."

"The evangelist?" Disbelieving, Hastings shook his head. "You're kidding."

"Not Austin Holloway himself. But someone in his organization, sure as hell. Because that's what the computer turned up, you see. The only common denominator was the itinerary of Austin Holloway. And, believe me, our programmer—he's a genius—he punched in everything; big league baseball schedules, stock car racers, cosmetics salesmen, every kind of convention you can name, God knows what all. It took him months, assigning a code to all the suspect models, then running the program. But finally it came down to Holloway. Computerwise, it's absolutely irrefutable. I was there myself, and saw it happen. The programmer punched in the code for Austin Holloway's

itinerary, and the goddamn bells and whistles went off. And I'm talking a hundred-percent correlation."

"That's not evidence, though."

"Maybe not. But it's sure as hell probable cause. Reason enough to turn out the troops, as I'm sure you'd certainly agree."

"Yes," Hastings answered slowly. "I'd agree." He let a moment of thoughtful silence pass, staring across his small, glass-paneled office before he said softly, "So now Holloway's in San Francisco."

"Right."

"How long have you known this, about Holloway's connection with the murders?"

"Just about two weeks," Draper answered.

"Have you had Holloway under surveillance in Los Angeles?"

"The FBI hasn't. So far, we're just acting in an advisory capacity. But the local authorities've put three men on it, full-time. Lieutenant Brinker, in Homicide down there, is the officer in charge."

"Have they got anything? Any leads?"

"Not yet, as far as I know. L.A.'s got at least eight cases, potentially. If we're right, the last victim was killed about five weeks ago."

Nodding thoughtfully, Hastings let his gaze wander away again, this time to focus on his own private view: a truncated cityscape, highlighted by a tiny, top-to-bottom slice of the Transamerica Pyramid.

Austin Holloway . . .

The face, the voice, the man—known throughout the world, a Sunday video presence in millions of American homes. Of all the TV evangelists, Holloway was the most successful, the most famous, the most mesmerizing, some said the most manipulative, therefore the most dangerous. A recent newsmagazine had done a cover story on TV evangelists. In every category—number of weekly viewers, gross revenue, value of real estate holdings—Holloway had far outstripped his nearest competitor. Hastings could clearly recall the magazine's cover: Austin Holloway, dressed in a purple robe, handsome as a gray-haired prophet.

with his towering glass cathedral glowing in the background. The inference: among American evangelists, Austin Holloway was chairman of the board.

"You aren't telling me," Hastings said, "that you think Austin Holloway himself is killing these hookers. Because the description we've got doesn't fit Holloway."

"What I'm telling you," Draper said, "is what the computer tells me. And, as far as I know, there's no data on the suspect. The weapon, yes. The suspect, no." He glanced at his wristwatch, rose, pointed to his business card lying on Hastings's desk. "I've got a lunch date, and then I'll be tied up for the rest of the day. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep in touch. And don't forget, when it's news conference time, remember Uncle. Remember Uncle—and remember me."

Also on his feet, Hastings extended his hand. "I'll remember—both of you."

5

Friedman saw it lying in the center of his desk, printed with a bold black felt marking pen across a form meant for interoffice memos, a message from Hastings:

SEE ME ASAP.

For Friedman, it was an intriguing surprise; Hastings seldom used a felt marker, almost never sounded the alarm.

Stopping only at a dispensing machine, then carrying a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee, Friedman walked down a short hallway to Hastings's office. Seeing him alone, bent over his desk, Friedman knocked twice on the glass door and entered without being invited. He closed the door, went to Hastings's visitors' chair, and sank down with a grateful sigh as he sipped the steaming coffee Friedman was a large, big-bellied man in his middle fifties. His face was broad and swarthy, his dark eyes heavily lidded. His graying hair was thick, haphazardly combed. Even at odd hours, Friedman wore three-piece suits that never quite fit. His collar was perpetually mashed by a sizable double chin, his vests constantly smudged by cigar ash. Friedman's manner was elliptical, playfully inscrutable. Offered a captaincy and command of Homicide, he'd promptly declined. Instead, he'd offered Hastings a deal. Friedman would work inside, exercising his intellect in the battle against crime, while Hastings worked in the field, exercising his muscles. Hastings had accepted, and Chief Dwyer had reluctantly gone along. Unlike Dwyer, Friedman and Hastings had never regretted their decision.

"What's up?" Friedman asked, settling himself more comfortably in the visitor's chair and putting his coffee on Hastings's desktop.

In detail, Hastings ran down the MacFarland homicide, then described his meeting with Draper. As he finished, Friedman began dolefully shaking his head. "You know what's happening here, don't you?" he said. "It's the goddamn inevitable, finally coming true. The computers're taking over."

"This is no different than our fingerprint computer," Hastings answered. "It's like Draper said, the computer comes up with comparisons that it'd take techs weeks to make. Months, maybe."

"That's techs," Friedman grunted. "I'm talking about us." He touched the vest pocket where, every morning, he put four cigars, his daily ration. Then he remembered that he'd smoked his fourth cigar as he rode to the Hall of Justice. "So how're we handling it?"

"Canelli and Culligan are at the St. Francis, getting the feel of things. That's where Austin Holloway and a lot of his staff are staying. I'm going to go over there in a half hour. If it's feasible, I thought I'd take Dancer Browne along and plant him in the lobby, or somewhere. We might get lucky."

Amused, Friedman smiled: a slow, lazy twisting of his cherub's mouth. "The DA'll love that—his key witness a pimp."

"Have you got a better idea?"

"No." Friedman's ironic smile widened. "But I hope you can find a potted palm, or something, to stick Dancer Browne behind. I've never met the gentleman, but if he's like most pimps I've met, I don't think he's going to fit in with the St. Francis crowd."

Hastings made no comment, and for a long moment the two men sat silently, thinking about the computer-generated possibilities. Finally, still smiling ironically, Friedman shook his head, as if he'd just been struck by a thought so incredibly intriguing that it must be shared:

"God," he said. "Wouldn't it be great if we nailed one of Austin Holloway's flunkies for murder one? It'd be a public service, for God's sake."

Reflectively answering the smile, Hastings nodded. "I know . . ."

"What's Holloway doing here, anyhow—in San Francisco? This sure as hell isn't the Bible Belt."

"Good question. I was wondering myself."

"We should lean on that room clerk," Friedman said. "If we get a positive ID from the pimp—Browne—I think we should get that clerk down here, and make sure he does it right, for the lineup. I'll find out who owns the—what's the name of the hotel?"

"The Bayside."

"Yeah. I'll find out who owns it, and give him a little peek at what kind of grief he can expect if that night clerk doesn't give us the right answers."

"Good idea." Hastings put a paperweight on a stack of interrogation reports, and got to his feet. "Well, I'm going over to the St. Francis. Will you be here tomorrow?"

"In the afternoon, maybe. I've got to be in court until the jury's charged. Which the judge should do tomorrow, first thing. I'll call in when I know more. Meanwhile, good luck in the Tenderloin."

"Thanks."

6

"There he is," Penziner said, pointing to Dancer Browne's Continental, pulling to a stop in a yellow no-parking zone. "How d'you want to handle it?"

"You haven't talked to him today, is that right?" Hastings asked.

"Right. I just came on duty an hour ago. And Dancer doesn't keep office hours."

"I think I'll talk to him alone," Hastings said. "No point in attracting any more attention than we can help. By the way, do you know who owns the Bayside Hotel?"

"Some Iranians, the way I understand it. Rich Iranians, with lots of real estate in San Francisco. I'm not sure who runs it day-to-day, though. Or, more like it, night-to-night." Penziner smiled, pleased with his joke. He was a tall, stooped, hollow-chested man, divorced three times. He wore polyester suits, tassled loafers and a mismatched toupee. In defiance of departmental guidelines, he carried a .45 automatic in a bulging shoulder holster. But, in fifteen years, Penziner had never fired a shot in the line of duty.

"See if you can find out who actually manages the Bayside," Hastings said. "The room clerk that was on duty last night—that big black guy. Do you know him?"

Penziner nodded. "His name is Floyd Harrison. He used to box. And he's a mean son of a bitch."

"Has he ever been busted?"

"Not for anything heavy, I don't think."

"I want him to be available for an identification if we turn up anyone. And I want him cooperative. So find out who's managing the Bayside, and tell him that unless Harrison works with us, we're going to make it very hard for the hotel to stay in business Lieutenant Friedman'll do the same number on the owners once he tracks them down."

"Right."

"And do it as soon as you can. It could be that we've only got a few days on the MacFarland homicide."

"How come?"

"I'll tell you later." Hastings walked briskly across Mason Street. He was a big, muscular man who moved easily and economically, projecting a calm, quiet self-confidence. He wore a Harris tweed sports jacket, a wool tie, and flannel slacks. His features were regular: full mouth, straight nose, broad forehead, firm chin. His brown eyes were thoughtful, but watchful. In his forties, he still had most of his hair, a source of secret satisfaction.

As he'd done last night, Hastings rapped on the Continental's passenger window. This time, he didn't show his shield. Plainly reluctant, Dancer swung the door open.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Lieutenant. It—you know—tarnishes my image."

Without comment, Hastings swung the door shut and shifted on the glove-leather seat to face the other man.

"Have you got a conservative suit and tie, Dancer?"

Surprised, Dancer studied the detective's face, which told him nothing. Finally, cautiously, Dancer nodded. "Sure I do. Why you asking?"

"Because I want you to go home and put on the suit. I want you to do it now. Right now Then I want you to go to the lobby of the St. Francis. That's where I'll meet you." He looked at his watch. "It's one-thirty. I'll see you there at two-thirty. Sharp."

"But—"

"If I'm not there, contact the house detective. He'll tell you what to do And remember, I said a conservative suit. I want you to look like you went to Harvard. Clear?"

"But—" Deeply aggrieved, Dancer gestured toward the street outside. "But I got things to *do* here. I got *business*."

Hastings tripped the door handle, swung open the door, got out of the car. He leaned down, waited until they made eye contact, then spoke quietly: "If you aren't at the St. Francis by two-thirty, Dancer, you're out of business. Permanently."

"But—"

"And I wasn't kidding about Harvard. You come there looking like a pimp, it's your ass."

"Pimp?" Elaborately aggrieved, Dancer raised expressive eyebrows, pursed full, disapproving lips. "Pimp, did you say?"

Hastings smiled: an ironic twisting of his wide mouth. "How about procurer? Better?"

"Better," Dancer replied, nodding judiciously. "Much better."

Dressed in a wrinkled corduroy jacket and haphazardly pressed brown slacks, raising his plump chin against the unaccustomed constriction of a tie, seated in a delicately carved Regency armchair, Canelli was plainly ill at ease. Seeing Hastings walking through the revolving doors on the Powell Street side of the St. Francis lobby, Canelli immediately rose. Tentatively smiling, he raised his hand—then reconsidered. The hand came quickly down, the smile of amiable recognition quickly vanished as he stood motionless, waiting for Hastings to take the initiative. When Hastings came directly to him, Canelli ventured a second smile.

"Hi, Lieutenant."

"Hello, Canelli. Where's Marsten and Culligan?"

"Marsten's on the Post Street entrance, and Culligan's on the Geary Street side."

"There're three entrances, then."

"Yessir. Plus the garage. But this one—" He gestured. "Powell Street, that's the main one."

Hastings led the way to a green velvet sofa placed beside a towering pillar intricately carved in dramatically veined marble.

A huge fiddle-leaf fig grew in a hammered brass planter, partially concealing the sofa from the hotel's elevators and main desk.

"So what's the rundown?" Hastings said.

"Well . . ." Worriedly, Canelli shook his head, fretfully frowning. "Well, we aren't exactly organized, I guess you'd say. I mean, we've only been here for a little over an hour, you know. And you told us to—you know—keep a low profile, and everything, till you got here. So, really, there isn't a hell of a lot to report, Lieutenant."

"Did you talk to the hotel detective?"

"No, sir. I mean, I figured you'd want to do that." Anxiously looking for signs of approval, Canelli's soft brown eyes scanned the other man's face. To himself, Hastings smiled. Canelli was the only cop he'd ever known who could constantly get his feelings hurt.

"That's right." Hastings nodded. "I'll talk to him."

"But I talked to the bell captain," Canelli offered. "He said that the Holloway people have the whole eleventh floor. So I decided to go up there just to—you know—look around. I mean, I didn't plan to show my shield or anything. But what d'you think happened, when I pressed the elevator button for the eleventh floor?"

Gently, Hastings sighed. "I give up, Canelli. What happened?"

"Nothing, that's what happened. Zero."

"Zero?"

"If you press eleven, nothing happens. The goddamn buttons're blanked out, or something. I couldn't believe it. But that's what happens, the bell captain said, when the president comes, or somebody. The elevator won't stop at their floor, unless you know which other buttons to push. Like, if you push three and one and four, quickly, then you'll get the eleventh floor. Clever, huh?"

"So what'd you do? Use the code?"

"No. I mean, I didn't think that would be very low profile." Once more, he looked for approval in Hastings's face, then said, "So I went up to twelve, and then walked down. And, of course,

the next thing I know, I'm eyeball-to-eyeball with a couple of guys in blue blazers, who start asking questions."

"Private security people."

Canelli emphatically nodded. "Definitely."

"Do you have any idea how many Holloway people are up there on the eleventh floor?"

"The bell captain guessed about fifty altogether."

"Fifty . . ." Hastings checked the time, stood up. "I'm going to talk to the house detective. You stay here. Amy MacFarland's pimp will be here by two-thirty. Do you know him by sight?"

"Yessir."

"Okay, good. Have we got enough surveillance radios and a good, clear frequency?"

"Yessir." Canelli patted his inside pocket, where he'd concealed his radio. "But the thing is, we're kind of hamstrung, as far as any real surveillance goes. I mean, all we've got is a general description. And I bet I've seen a hundred guys that are between twenty-five and thirty-five, with dark blond hair, just since I got here."

"First I'll talk to the house detective. Then we'll work out something."

"If they're coming from the eleventh floor, they'll be using that bank of elevators," the hotel detective said, pointing. "Of course, if they go down to the fifth floor, then they could use the elevators on the Post Street side."

"And what if they use the stairs?"

The hotel detective shrugged. "Same thing. The stairs run beside the elevator shafts. Then there's the main staircase, coming down from the third floor." He looked at Hastings. "What's this all about, anyhow?"

"We think someone connected with Holloway might've committed a felony. We're going to try to find him, and question him. He's twenty-five to thirty, dark blond hair, medium build. Pale face, I gather." Hopefully, Hastings looked at the other man. "Ring any bells?"

"Afraid not. What kind of felony're we talking about?"

"A serious felony." Looking across the elegantly furnished lobby toward the Powell Street entrance, Hastings saw a tall, graceful black man jauntily emerging from the revolving doors, as arrogantly as a Bantu prince. Dancer Browne had arrived.

"What I'd like you to do," Hastings said, speaking to the hotel detective, "is get me a list of everyone on the eleventh floor, every guest. I'd also like to use your phone for messages, if that's all right." Apologetically, he shook his head. "What's your name again? I'm sorry—"

"The name's Malloy," the detective said, extending his card "Bill Malloy, retired from the LAPD."

Handing over his own card, Hastings shook hands with the other man, then signaled to Dancer Browne, who was sitting at his ease in a luxurious tufted armchair, one long leg crossed over the other. Browne was wearing a double-breasted suit, conservatively pinstriped. His red silk tie was paisley-printed; his high-collared white shirt gleamed. In his lapel, an antique diamond stickpin sparkled.

"You look like a stockbroker," Hastings said, sitting in a facing chair.

"Man, I *feel* like a stockbroker," Browne answered. "They say clothes make the man. And it's true. You feel like how you look."

"Sorry to pull you away from business."

Airily, Dancer waved a long-fingered hand. "No problem. I've got an assistant."

"This could be important—a big one. Or, at least, a very delicate one."

"Yeah, well —" Dancer waved again, this time magnanimously. "Well, just don't forget, all right? I mean, sometimes I have—ah—problems, downtown. You know?"

Hastings nodded. "I know And I hear you." He turned to point to the hotel's main bank of four elevators. "We've got good reason to think that the man who killed Amy is staying here, at this hotel. And if he is then he'll probably be using those

elevators. So what I'd like you to do is just hang around here, until—"

"*Hey—*"

Irritated at the interruption, Hastings turned to look at the black man. He saw Dancer meaningfully move his chin in the direction of the hotel's main entrance. A young man with dark blond hair had just pushed open one of the two doors that flanked the revolving doors, and was walking slowly across the lobby in the direction of the main desk. Slowly, Hastings rose to his feet. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm positive, man. Look at those eyes. There's no one at home."

"You stay here," Hastings ordered. "Don't move." Across the lobby, he caught Canelli's eye, surreptitiously nodding in the direction of the blond young man, who was now waiting at the desk for a clerk to acknowledge him. Also on his feet, Canelli nodded in return, began angling easily toward the desk. Reflexively, both detectives unbuttoned their jackets, touched the butts of their service revolvers. With twenty-five feet still separating him from the suspect, Hastings heard someone calling his name. Turning, he saw Bill Malloy. The hotel detective held a printout sheet in his hand, and was looking at Hastings expectantly. Satisfied that Canelli was close enough to grab the suspect if he ran, Hastings beckoned for Malloy to come closer.

"Here's the guest list," Malloy said. "But I couldn't get—"

"Not now—" With his eyes back on the suspect, Hastings raised a cautionary hand. "That one at the desk, the blond man wearing the beige jacket, no tie, brown shoes. Know him?"

"Sure do," Malloy answered promptly. "That's Elton Holloway. Is he the one you—?"

"Elton Holloway? Who's Elton Holloway?"

"Elton Holloway's Austin Holloway's son."

7

The cameraman widened his focus to include both Austin Holloway and Jeffrey Christopher, anchorman for the Channel 4 *News at 11*. Deep-focused, the shot caught the opulence of the St. Francis's presidential suite, with a large view window in the background, framed by red damask draperies. Pleased with the angle, the cameraman smiled slightly, concentrating on holding the frame steady. In the viewfinder, he saw Christopher smiling smoothly as he leaned forward, about to slip in a sugarcoated zinger, Christopher's speciality.

"What I'm wondering, Mr. Holloway—what many are wondering—is: Why San Francisco? Los Angeles, yes. The Bible Belt, yes. But San Francisco? Why?" Engagingly, the smile widened as Christopher, ever mindful of the camera, turned his head slightly for a more flattering angle.

Seated in a carved armchair that could have come from a castle, Austin Holloway decided to smile benevolently. In his sixties, Holloway was perfectly cast for his evangelical role. His silver hair was full and flowing, a deftly styled biblical mod. His blue eyes were clear, dramatically alive, wonderfully expressive. His profile, too, was dramatic, as arresting as a prophet's. His torso was trim, broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted. His voice was rich and resonant.

"Our crusade, Mr. Christopher, is for all the people—those who sin, and those who follow the commandments of the Lord. And San Francisco, certainly, is a challenge." Focused just between the camera and the anchorman, his smile was broad,

both benevolent and compelling, gently mischievous, infinitely tolerant.

"You'll be holding your Sunday service at the Cow Palace, where the Republicans have held their conventions in the past. Do you expect to fill all the seats?"

The smile remained in place; the eyes sparkled, chiding the questioner. The voice expressed genial tolerance for the other man's callowness. "We don't concern ourselves with statistics, Mr. Christopher. If one soul is saved on Sunday, this San Francisco Crusade for Christ will have succeeded."

Recognizing an exit line that couldn't be topped, Christopher turned toward the camera, which was now focused fully on his face.

"Austin Holloway—America's premiere TV evangelist, in San Francisco for the first time in his forty-odd years in the pulpit." A pause, as the camera held for the segment's final seconds. Then: "This is Jeffrey Christopher, Channel Four News."

Both the reporter and the evangelist held their on-camera smiles until the tiny red light beneath the lens blinked out. Then both men rose, shook hands, exchanged perfunctory good-byes, turned away from each other. An impassive blue-blazered security man nodded to the reporter and cameraman, ushering them out into the hallway. As the door closed behind them, Holloway turned to the two men who had advanced from behind the camera to stand side by side, facing him. Physically, the men were exact opposites. At age fifty, Herbert Flournoy was a lean, taut, avid man, visibly restless, fastidiously dressed, precise when he moved. In his sixties, Lloyd Mitchell was massively built, stolidly uncompromising. Flournoy was dressed for the boardroom. Like the men who worked for him, Lloyd Mitchell wore bodyguard blue.

But if their dress differed, their eyes were the same: cold, watchful eyes. Inscrutable eyes, revealing nothing.

In unison, Holloway and Flournoy checked their watches. Both men were businesslike, slightly abstracted, obviously accustomed to planning, thinking ahead, working within tight schedules.

"How long will it take at City Hall?" Holloway asked.

"Portal to portal," Flournoy answered. "I figure it an hour flat—fifteen minutes down, fifteen minutes back, a half hour for the ceremony."

"How's the coverage?"

"Both newspapers, only one TV channel, so far." Flournoy shrugged. "Benton's still trying."

"Is the mayor coming Sunday?" Holloway asked.

"He hasn't committed himself yet." Flournoy tapped his watch. "You've only got twelve minutes."

"Fine." Holloway nodded, turning away. "Just enough time for a good, satisfying crap."

Flournoy's face registered prim, unsmiling disapproval. It was a turn-of-the-century schoolmaster's face: pinched nostrils, a thin, tight mouth, pale, passionless eyes. The flesh of his face was sallow; his bald head was fringed with brown hair.

Flournoy waited for the connecting door to close on Holloway before he turned to Lloyd Mitchell. Flournoy spoke quietly, without inflection: "This town worries me. The SLA, the Zebra killings, the Zodiac murders—they all happened here. Are we covered?"

"I've got three men with Uzis in their attache cases," Mitchell answered. "It's not legal, but that's what they've got. And the police will be at the Cow Palace. They'll be at the civic luncheon, too. And today, of course, when he gets the key to the city."

"What about the banquet on Thursday? Will the police be there?"

Mitchell's large, squared-off head moved impassively from side to side. "That's private, not on city or county property, and there's no municipal tie-in. So there's no way. But I've hired extra men. They'll be on duty Sunday, too. And the limos've been checked."

Nodding, Flournoy beckoned for Mitchell to accompany him to the opposite corner of the sitting room, away from the connecting door.

"Marvella's been getting extra liquor," Flournoy said quietly. "Susan isn't doing her job. Any thoughts?"

With his eyes on the connecting door, prepared to break off when Holloway appeared, Mitchell said, "Austin's got to leave her at home on these trips. In Los Angeles, she's all right. It's only on the road that she goes off the rails."

"She's more manageable in Los Angeles," Flournoy answered, correcting the other man. "But she's far from all right."

Mitchell shrugged in his massive shoulders. "Marvella's part of The Hour. And The Hour holds everything together."

"Austin holds everything together." Flournoy's voice was cold, uncompromising. "Austin *is* The Hour."

"This is no time to talk about Marvella." Mitchell spoke slowly, in a heavy, measured voice. The voice, the body, the face, all were complementary facets of the man: implacable, unyielding. "Not here. Not now."

"Will you talk to Susan, though?" Flournoy pressed. "I don't want any problems on Sunday."

"I'll talk to her, yes."

Holloway stood up, flushed the toilet, tucked in his shirt, zipped up his trousers, stepped in front of the washbasin. The faucets were gold-plated dolphins, the basin was marble. The mirror, too, was gold framed. As he washed his hands he looked himself squarely in the eye. Next month, he would be sixty-four years old. So far, the years had treated him kindly. The eyes were still clear, still commanding. The flesh beneath the eyes was still firm. Yes, the skin was lined and creased and wrinkled. But it was the pattern of the wrinkles that mattered, not the fact of their existence. And, with the exception of the creases that slightly puckered his lower lip—the mewling creases, he called them—he was pleased with what he saw in the mirror. And, yes, he was pleased with what he saw in the film clips. The cameras had been good to him, and he was grateful. The people apparently liked what they saw, too. Because the mail had never been heavier, or the checks more bountiful. As for the sagging flesh beneath the jawline . . . He lifted his chin, moved his head from side to side. "Turkey wattles," his father had called them. And turkey wattles ran in the family, unhappily. Vividly, he could remember

sitting in the first row of hard wooden benches, looking up, seeing the loose flesh of his father's neck swish from side to side as his father pounded the pulpit, exhorting an apathetic congrega tion.

Slowly, reflectively, he took a towel from the rack, carefully dried his hands, dropped the towel on the counter beside the basin. Although his eyes still stared into the depths of the mirror, his gaze was unfocused now, lost in distant memory.

In recent years, more frequently each year, images of his father returned. They returned at odd times, for odd reasons, some of them fragments, some of them whole. Most often, the images centered on the Sunday morning services: his father, clutching the pulpit with both his scrawny hands, preaching to a meager congregation with his high, whining voice, the same voice with which he complained about the high cost of living, or the sad state of his son's report card, or burst pipes in winter, or burnt lawns in the summer. Only once had he ever seen his father enraged; only once had he ever seen his father's hand raised in anger. And for that he had always secretly despised his father; not for his rage, but for his forbearance.

Holloway took his pinstriped jacket from the gold-plated hook. Without looking at his watch, he knew that the twelve minutes Flournoy had allotted him had already passed into eternity. It was time, therefore, to go downstairs, enter his limo, and be driven to the steps of City Hall, where the mayor would present him with a key to the city. It would be this thirteenth key. Lucky thirteen.

Seated beside Flournoy, Holloway was facing Mitchell and a security man named Tucker sitting on the jump seats. An attaché case rested on the floor beside Tucker. Inside the case, Holloway had been told, there was a small machine gun.

In the limo behind, carrying Marvella and Susan Gaines, two other security men were riding, one of them carrying another attaché case.

Ahead, two lines of bumper-to-bumper midday traffic were impacted. On the steps of City Hall, his honor the mayor might already be waiting, checking the time.

At his side, Holloway heard Flournoy clearing his throat. Another cool, calm, closely reasoned lesson was about to begin. Before he'd joined The Crusade, Flournoy had been a corporation comptroller. Writing his constant string of memos, or delivering his day-to-day, hour-to-hour briefings, Flournoy's pronouncements had the tempo and texture of an annual report that had been put on an audio cassette.

"So far," Flournoy said, "we simply aren't getting good attendance projections for Sunday, Austin. We've talked about this—the demographics here. And I must tell you, I'm concerned. There's no real constituency here or in Marin County. And nothing down the Peninsula, either. At least not until you get to Redwood City. And it's a fact that the longer people have to travel, the less likely they are to show up. It's true that the East Bay has a lot of potential. But Oakland's mostly black. And we've talked about that—about the blacks, on camera. Also, I'm getting the feeling that we're going to get a lot of tongue-in-cheek, yuppie media coverage. And that worries me. That one from Channel Four, just now, for instance—" Flournoy shook his head. "He's going to do a job on us in the editing. I can feel it."

Holloway smiled: an easy, confident smile. "Herbert, you're a whiz with figures, and you're a hell of an organizer, an executive's executive. But you've got to appreciate the fact that what we're involved in here is show business, pure and simple. Now, you evidently listened to what that bright young Jeffrey Christopher said, but you may have missed what I said." Quizzically, Holloway smiled at his chief of staff. "Is that possible?"

Peevishly, Flournoy declined the gambit as he stared through the windshield at the lines of cars ahead. The reason for the traffic jam was an apartment house fire, two blocks ahead. At this rate, they could be a half hour late. Understandably, the mayor would be furious.

"Because if you'd listened," Holloway was saying, "and if you listened at last week's situational session, Herbert, you'd realize that what we're doing here in San Francisco is something entirely different from what we've ever done before. We go to St.

Louis, or Baltimore, or Houston, or wherever, and we're basically giving them the same old crap, week after week- year after year. We're feeding the same lines to the same people. Right?"

"That's not what I'm saying, Austin. I'm saying that—"

"This week," Holloway said, smoothly raising a pontifical hand, "is going to be different. San Francisco is a hotbed of corruption and sin. Virtually every plague that afflicts this society has its roots—deep roots—right here, in this city. It's Sodom and Gomorrah. And I'll guarantee you, Herbert, that by the time I've finished with this city—with its perverts and its radicals and its free love—by the time I've finished, the faithful in Des Moines are going to be glued to their television sets. They'll be hooting, and they'll be hollering, Herbert. And they'll be responding, too. When the mail comes in—when you read your printouts, about ten days from now—you'll realize that I'm right. This city is evil personified. Don't forget, this is where the AIDS scourge started, a plague that could rival the Black Death. And I know you'll understand me when I say that with proper attention to detail—and with a little creative imagination—the faithful can be made to understand that the future of the whole human race as we know it could be decided right here, right now." Having allowed his voice to rise to a reflexive tremolo, Holloway paused, let his mouth twitch into a knowing smile as he said, "Armageddon, in other words. Big medicine, Herbert. Very big medicine indeed, properly packaged."

Behind sparkling gold-framed glasses, Flournoy's eyes were speculative. Finally he shrugged his impeccably tailored shoulders. "Maybe you're right, Austin. It's happened before, that you've been right. God knows, your instincts are usually accurate. However, as you know, it's my job to ask these questions." As he spoke, Flournoy looked ahead. Finally, the fire trucks were moving off. The limo was beginning to inch forward.

Elaborately magnanimous, Holloway inclined his handsome head. "I *want* you to ask questions, Herbert. Believe me. Incidentally, speaking of Sunday, tell Benton that when hi

cameras cut away, I want them to pick up some of these characters—punk rockers, fags, anyone who'll stand out. Targets of opportunity, in other words. Not totally, of course. But I want him to keep it in mind. Give him the game plan, in other words."

"Right." From an inside pocket, Flournoy withdrew a gold Cross pen and gold-bound notebook, presents from the vice-president. Meticulously, he made a note to himself.

8

Marvella looked into the security man's eyes, then looked quickly away.

They were all the same, these men who carried guns. Their eyes were the same: at the center, far back, a gleam of death glittered, still as a snake's eye, watching, waiting.

The first time she'd seen a snake, she'd been playing beside the creek that ran along the northern edge of her daddy's property. She'd been sailing tiny paper boats, watching them disappear as the creek flowed beneath a low-growing tree branch. The snake had looked like a part of the tree root, growing exposed on the riverbank. Only the snake's head had been visible—the head and the eyes, fixed on her, unblinking. She'd been six when she'd seen the snake. Never before had she experienced terror.

She'd been sixteen when she'd first seen Austin. It had been a hot, humid summer afternoon, the summer between her junior and senior years. He'd been talking to her daddy. The two men, the old preacher and the young preacher, had been standing together in front of her daddy's tabernacle. He'd always called it his tabernacle, that poor, one-story clapboard building, originally a storefront, with its plate glass painted out, and its gilt cross hand-painted above the sagging door, with its white paint peeling, and its roof leaking.

At first Austin hadn't been aware of her. She'd been standing on the dusty pathway that led around to the back of the building, where she and her daddy lived. They'd been bargaining, Austin

and her daddy, deciding how much Austin would pay to use the tabernacle on Wednesday nights.

But then, as if he'd sensed her presence, Austin had turned toward her. Just for a moment, she'd felt helpless, unable to move, as surely transfixed as if she'd been her younger self, standing beside the creek, staring at the snake. She'd been suspended in time and place, staring at this stranger. It was the first time she'd ever felt as if her clothing had somehow lost substance, leaving her naked body exposed to a stranger's knowing eyes.

In that moment, she'd known that, whatever this stranger demanded of her, she would gladly give.

The traffic ahead was beginning to move; the limousine rocked gently, getting under way, following Austin. Through the smoked-glass windows on either side she could see strangers standing on sidewalks, watching them as they passed.

How had it happened, that these people stood on the sidewalk, watching, while she rode past them, so grandly invisible? Did they realize how small she felt, dressed in her thousand-dollar dress, wearing her two-hundred-dollar shoes, sitting beside Susan Gaines, whose job—whose sole responsibility—was to watch over her?

No.

Not watch over her.

Watch her.

Wherever she went, Susan was expected to go. By Austin's decree, their lives were connected, the captive and the keeper.

And now the keeper spoke:

"This is all we have today, just this presentation of the key to the city. It shouldn't take more than a half hour. Then we'll come back to the hotel, to rest. Mr. Holloway has meetings downtown, then later at the hotel. But that doesn't have anything to do with us."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be the civic luncheon. I've been talking with Herbert about it. Except for the actual service, on Sunday, the civic luncheon will be the most important thing we've got to do.

Mr. Holloway wants all the family there - you, Gloria, Elton And the grandchildren, too."

Marvella frowned. On her impeccably made-up face two small furrows between the eyebrows were the only imperfections "The grandchildren? Why?"

"Mr. Holloway thinks they can handle it."

"But they're so young, to sit still for that long. Carole is only five."

Sweetly, Susan Gaines smiled. "They're beautifully behaved I'm sure it'll work out. After all, if they can sing with the rest of you—the whole family, on Sundays—they should be able to handle a civic luncheon."

Fretfully, Marvella shook her head. But the two tiny frown-furrows had disappeared, returning her face to its bland, bogus, unblemished serenity. Covertly, she glanced at her watch. The time was fifteen minutes after three.

Less than two hours remained. Soon time so often her enemy, would reward her, befriend her, make this day whole again.

9

Hastings covered the telephone's mouthpiece as the door to the tiny office swung open to reveal Bill Malloy.

"Would you mind—could you excuse me for a minute or two?" Apologetically, Hastings smiled. "I'm getting my game plan."

"Oh, sure." The house detective flipped a casual hand. "Just make yourself at home, Lieutenant. Whatever." Carefully, Malloy closed the door.

Over the phone Hastings heard Friedman say, "What you're telling me is that Austin Holloway's son—the son of God, according to the TV ratings—is a mass murderer. Is that about it?"

"That's about it. If we believe Dancer Browne's identification."

"And *do* we believe Dancer Browne?"

"He's all we've got. Besides, the description Browne gave me last night fits. Perfectly. No one was prompting him, either. And then there's the FBI thing."

"That's not evidence, though. That's just a printout."

"I know that. All I'm asking is, how do we want to handle it?"

"What's the room clerk at the Bayside Hotel say?"

"His story hasn't changed. He says he didn't see the guy, didn't notice him, couldn't identify him. I'm beginning to believe him."

"Which leaves us with a pimp's testimony to show the DA."

"Jesus, Pete, I know all that." Hastings's voice rose an

aggrieved half note. "What I'm asking is, what do we do now? You're the guru, the planner. What's the plan?"

A moment of thoughtful silence passed. Then: "The plan is for me to come down to the St. Francis, get a look at the terrain."

Surprised, Hastings asked, "Are you kidding?"

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?"

"How long's it been since you've been out in the field?"

"The question is, how long has it been since I've had a shot at maybe tying a can to the likes of Austin Holloway."

"Not Holloway. His son."

"Same thing, in a way. Have you ever caught Holloway on TV, by any chance?"

"No."

"Well, I have. These guys fascinate me, these TV evangelists. Especially Holloway, who's in the catbird seat, no question. Do you know he's got a whole university down in Los Angeles—with a basketball team that made it to the playoffs, for God's sake. And do you also know that, every time he's in the neighborhood, he stops by the White House for lunch? Do you read *This Week*?"

"No."

"Well, they had an article on TV evangelists not too long ago. And the money they make—the power they have—is absolutely mind-boggling. Holloway has his own two communication satellites, for God's sake. Just think what that means. He owns them, and rents out time to other evangelists. These guys push the buttons and turn the knobs that control how millions of people think. They've got the American dream in their well-lined hip pockets."

"Jesus, I've never heard you so wound up."

Conceding the point, Friedman chuckled. "Usually we put in our time collaring someone who knifed someone in a bar, or someone who hit her husband too hard with an iron skillet during their standard Saturday night domestic argument. But what we've got here is the big time. I mean, we're talking about changing the course of history, here."

"I think someone gave you the key to the narcotics bin, that's what I think."

Undeterred, Friedman said, "You've never seen Holloway's act, or you'd know what I'm talking about. See, his whole pitch, his trademark, is the Holloway family. Some of these guys, you know, just sit at a desk, and talk into the camera—with an eight-hundred number at the bottom of the screen, to call and make a pledge. Not Holloway, that's not his style. He showcases his family. There's his wife, who's supposed to be the virgin mother, I guess, who sings a few lyrics, but mostly looks at Holloway adoringly. Her name is . . . I forget her name. Marvel, something like that. Then there's Holloway's daughter, who also sings—and who fills out a dress like you wouldn't believe. She's got two children, a boy and a girl. 'The grandkids,' as Holloway calls them. You can't believe it, how crazy Holloway is about 'the grandkids.' And then there's Elton. The ex–boy soprano."

"Are you telling me that you've been following Holloway since Elton was a boy soprano?"

"God, no. I'm just telling you that he looks like a boy soprano. Where'll I meet you, at the St. Francis?"

"In the lobby."

"Right. On my way."

"What we've got here," Friedman said, "is a problem in diplomacy."

"I'm glad to hear you say it," Hastings answered. "I was afraid you were going to arrest both of them—Elton for murder, and Holloway as an accessory."

"God . . ." Wishfully thinking, Friedman shook his head. "Wouldn't that be something? Just think about it . . ." Seated beside Hastings on a velvet sofa, staring reflectively at the main bank of the hotel's elevators, Friedman avidly touched his upper lip with a small pink tongue tip.

"I've never seen you like this, Pete. You're—" Hastings broke off, searching for the word. "You're excited. Actually excited. What is it with you and Holloway?"

Friedman shifted his stare to the other man's face. "It may

have escaped your notice," Friedman said stiffly, "but I have certain deep convictions. And one of those convictions is that people like Holloway are evil. The're . . ." He frowned, also searching. "They're blasphemers."

"Well," Hastings replied, "if you're doing to arrest Elton Holloway for the murder of Amy MacFarland, you're going to have to get on it. Today's Wednesday. The service is Sunday, at the Cow Palace. By Monday, they'll be back in Angeles. All of them."

"The first thing we've got to do, obviously, is talk to Elton. Where is he, do you know?"

"As far as I know, he's upstairs. The Holloway people have the whole eleventh floor. Elton's been in and out three times since we started surveillance."

"Has anyone talked to him yet? Friedman asked.

"No. I didn't want to spook him."

"Are these the elevators they use?"

"Mostly, I think. There're other exits, though. They're covered. We've got seven men here."

Thoughtfully, Friedman nodded. With the first rush of enthusiasm gone, the time for calculation had come. "What we've got to do," he said, "is develop some physical evidence. How thorough were the lab guys at the scene?"

Hastings shrugged. "As far as I knew—and they knew—we were just talking about another hooker who was trying to earn a little extra money doing the snuff thing. So they just hit the high spots, with the fingerprints. They didn't do any sweepings, nothing like that."

"Well," Friedman said, "I sent them back. They're over there right now, giving it the full-court press. Meanwhile, we've got to figure out how to get a set of Elton's fingerprints."

"We could always ask him."

"Has Holloway got his own security?"

"You bet he has," Hastings answered. "Lots of it. They've got the whole eleventh floor sealed off. Tight."

"So if we're going to interrogate Elton in his room," Friedman mused, "we're going to need warrants."

"No question."

"Has anyone tried to strike up a conversation with him? You know—follow him to a bar, buy him a drink, like that?"

Impatiently, Hastings sighed. "I've already told you that I wanted to talk to you before we made any contact with him."

"I wonder," Friedman said thoughtfully, "whether we should touch base with the chief on this."

"If we do that, we might as well call a news conference."

"If we arrest Elton Holloway, it'll be the same as calling a news conference. A nationwide news conference."

"Well," Hastings said, "you decide. You want to touch base with Dwyer, I'll go along. Whatever you say."

Sitting pear-shaped on the high-styled sofa, Friedman's broad, swarthy face settled again into its accustomed inscrutability. Heavily lidded brown eyes staring impassively into the middle distance, Friedman let a long, thoughtful silence pass. Then: "Are there other possibilities for physical evidence? Besides fingerprints?"

"There's the weapon—a piece of rope, probably. There're marks on her throat."

Friedman grunted. "Is that all?"

Also grunting, Hastings said, "Unless he dropped a handkerchief with his initials, that's all."

"Then we've got to talk to him. There's no other way. We've got to see how he reacts, see whether we have a chance of getting warrants. Is he upstairs, you say?"

"As far as I know, he's upstairs. Holloway and his wife left a couple of hours ago—in separate limos. The wife came back about an hour ago. She's upstairs. Everywhere she goes, she has a woman with her. And Holloway, of course, has people with him all the time. It's like they're royalty."

"Why don't you go up alone?" Friedman said. "Tell Elton that—you know—we're checking out a mugging, or something, that he might've witnessed. Meanwhile, I'll see if he's ever been fingerprinted, get the request in the computer, anyhow. Then I'll tell Canelli to set it up so we can follow him to a restaurant or a bar, whatever, see if we can get a glass that he handled."

"You should call Walter Draper, in Washington. The FBI could have his prints in their computer."

"Right." Friedman said it reluctantly. For as long as Hastings could remember, Friedman had been at odds with the FBI.

"What about a search warrant? Do you think there's a chance?"

Friedman shook his head. "With what we've got now—a pimp's identification—considering who's involved, I don't think we've got a prayer."

"You're probably right." Hastings got to his feet. "Okay, I'll give it a shot. See you here, afterward?"

"Right."

10

As Hastings pulled open the stairwell door, he slipped his shield case from his pocket. Yes, there he was: a big, thick-necked, blank-eyed man dressed in a blue blazer, rising from a small settee and moving to block Hastings's further progress down the corridor. In his left ear, the security man wore a tiny surveillance earphone.

"Help you?"

As Hastings showed his shield, he was aware that he was smiling: a flat, fake salesman's smile. Signifying what? Selling what? Why did he feel uncomfortable, as nervous as a rookie detective on his first case? The answer, of course, was the opulence that surrounded him: the crystal chandeliers, the richly flocked wallpaper, the small, delicately carved chairs and tables lining the corridor walls, the thick carpet underfoot, the arched ceiling above. Police business wasn't transacted here, in a hallway like this. It was in places like the Bayside Hotel that a policeman belonged. Not here.

"Yes, I—ah—I'm Lieutenant Frank Hastings. I'd like to speak to Elton Holloway."

The man in the blue blazer didn't smile in return; his expression remained stolidly unchanged. "Have you talked to Mr. Mitchell?" It was a polite question, firmly asked.

"Mr. Mitchell?"

"Lloyd Mitchell. Mr. Holloway's chief of security."

"Is he here?" Expectantly, Hastings looked down the corridor.

"No, sir. He's with Mr. Holloway. They're due back in—"

The security man pushed back a gleaming white cuff, consulted a sparkling gold wristwatch. "—in about an hour and a half."

"Sorry," Hastings said, moving a half step forward. "I can't wait that long. If you'll just tell me what room Elton Holloway's in, I'll ask him a few questions, and be on my way. It's about a street crime, last night, just a few blocks away. We're looking for witnesses."

The other man didn't move, didn't retreat, even a quarter step. And, beyond him, Hastings saw another security man coming toward them—an older, more determined security man, also dressed in a blue blazer, white shirt, gray flannel trousers, carefully polished black shoes. Idly, Hastings wondered whether men like these had permits to carry guns.

"Yes, what is it?" the second man asked. It was a harsh, impatient question. In reply, Hastings showed the shield, repeated the story. As he finished, he heard a nearby door open and close behind him. In unison, both security men looked beyond Hastings, tracking the sound. Watching their expressions change, Hastings realized that someone important had appeared. Turning, he saw a young woman and two small children. All three were dressed in sweaters and jeans. The woman was in her early thirties: slim, full-breasted, long-legged. Her chestnut hair was worn loose around her shoulders. Her eyes were calm, the set of her body was bold, the tilt of her chin was assertive. Her features were good, neither beautiful nor displeasing. Her expression was inquiring as she looked at the two security men—and frankly appraising, woman to man, as she looked at Hastings. When she saw the gold shield, she frowned.

As if an offstage director had called for a freeze in the action, no one moved or spoke. Then the woman said simply, "Yes?"

Even though the single word was spoken softly, it nevertheless established her dominance over the two security men. Remembering Friedman's rundown of the Holloway family, Hastings realized that the woman must be Holloway's daughter. The children, a girl and a boy, were doubtless the grandchildren. As the older of the two security men explained the situation, the two children held to their mother's hands while they stared at the gold

shield. On impulse, Hastings tilted the shield to a better angle for the children, and smiled down at them. Neither returned his smile.

While the security man talked, the woman kept her eyes on his face. When he finished, she stood silently for a long, thoughtful moment. Finally, as if she'd come to a decision, she turned to face Hastings squarely.

"I'm Gloria Holloway," she said, still speaking with quiet, measured authority. "Elton's sister. Maybe I can help you." She bent down, disengaged her hands, spoke to the children: "You go to Grandma's room. I'll be there in a few minutes, after I've talked to this gentleman. Ask Grandma if she wants to go with us to Fisherman's Wharf. Tell her we're going to ride the cable car, so she should wear slacks."

The girl turned obediently away, but the boy stood his ground, staring up at Hastings. As he returned the stare, Hastings knew what the boy would ask:

"Can I see your gun?"

Smiling, Hastings shook his head. "Not now. Maybe sometime later, but not now. What's your name?"

"James. What's yours?"

"Frank. Frank Hastings. How old are you?"

"Almost eight."

"Do you sing with your grandfather on Sundays?"

Gravely, the boy nodded. It was a businesslike nod, as if he'd abruptly lost his innocence. "Did you ever see me? We're on TV every Sunday." The question, too, was businesslike.

"I—ah—"

"James, you go see Grandma." Gloria Holloway turned the child down the hallway after his sister, sending him on his way with a firm, friendly pat on the butt.

"Saved," Hastings said, smiling at her. "Thanks."

Not returning the smile, she gestured to a nearby door, at the same time nodding dismissal to the two security men. The older of the two hesitated, plainly doubtful that the woman had made the right decision. Ignoring the man's misgivings, she opened her door, preceded Hastings into a lavishly decorated sitting room.

As Hastings followed, his eyes dropped appreciatively to the woman's buttocks, provocatively moving beneath her tight blue jeans. How would Austin Holloway's daughter react if she were pinched? What would she be like in bed? Would she take the initiative, as she was doing now?

She sat at one end of a sofa, and invited him with a gesture to sit at the other end. As he twisted on the sofa to face her, he realized that he had no idea how to begin. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for this, questioning the sister of a serial murder suspect, both of them children of a man who owned communications satellites and dined with presidents.

As if she'd discovered his discomfort, he thought he could see amusement in her eyes as she made no effort to speak, but simply waited for him to begin:

"This is quite an operation you've got here," he ventured. Then, recognizing the false start, he said, "I mean, it's obviously a big deal, putting on your—" He broke off. What was it, that they put on, every Sunday? A performance? A revival meeting? A religious service?

The amusement in her eyes had deepened. Sitting in her expensive suite, she was faintly smiling, watching him with tolerant patience. Her eyes, he noticed, were a deep violet. Her mouth was expressive—inviting. With her back slightly arched, her breasts were generously offered for his appraisal. Her legs were crossed, revealing taut thighs beneath the faded denim of her designer jeans. She sat with one arm resting along the top of the sofa, the fingers within inches of his shoulder. Completely at ease, she was waiting for him to muddle through: "I don't really have to take any of your time. I mean, you were obviously going out with your children. So if you'll just put me in touch with your brother—Elton—I won't bother you anymore."

"It's no bother. Elton . . ." She hesitated. "He's very shy. You wouldn't know it to hear him sing, but he's actually very reluctant to meet people—strangers, anyhow."

"Still, I've got to talk to him." He broke off, dropped his voice, deliberately hardened his gaze. "It's a police matter. So one way or the other, I've got to talk with him."

Her gaze, too, hardened. Her voice, too, dropped as she said, "What do you mean, exactly, when you say 'one way or the other'? That sounds like a threat."

"It's not a threat. I'm simply telling you that I've got to talk to him. I hope he'll agree to see me. If not, then—" Meaningfully, he shrugged.

"Then what?" she asked softly. "What would happen if he didn't agree?"

"If he won't talk to me—now—then I'd come back later, with another man. We'd demand that he talk to us—here. If he refused, then we'd take him downtown for questioning."

"This is serious." As she spoke, she let her eyes wander thoughtfully away, finally fixing on a large plate glass window that offered a spectacular view of San Francisco Bay. She sat motionless, staring at her expensive view. Then, softly, she said, "Donald—the security man—said you wanted to question Elton about something he might've seen last night." Another moment of calculating silence passed. Then, deliberately, the violet eyes returned to meet his squarely.

"What was it that he was supposed to have seen?"

"I'm investigating a crime that was committed about ten o'clock last night, just a few blocks from here. We think your brother has some information that could help us."

"What kind of information, exactly?"

Hastings drew a deep breath. "I'd rather discuss that with Elton, Miss—Ms.—Holloway."

The woman, too, drew a deep, measured breath. This was the decisive moment, the make-or-break point that, sooner or later, every interrogation pivoted on. The maneuvering, the tactical half truths, the outright lies, were behind them. Now they were playing for keeps, everything pushed into the pot.

"I gather," she said, "that you aren't a particular fan of my father's—of TV evangelism."

"Until now," Hastings answered, "I never thought much about it."

"Well," she said, "it's pretty much a business, if you want to know the truth. Big business. You're obviously an intelligent

man. If you haven't already figured out what Austin Holloway is all about, you certainly will before you're finished. And the truth is, men like my father are like rock stars. They have a unique talent. My father would call it a God-given talent. And he's right, of course—depending on how you define God." She spoke in a flat, uninflected voice. The message: they weren't discussing God. This was business. Serious business.

"But the point is," she said, "people like my father—and Mick Jagger, and Elvis Presley, and all the rest of them—they're people who, when they're on stage, make enormous sums of money. My father generates more money—more capital flow—than a lot of major businesses that employ thousands of people. Which means that people like my father need managers. They need people to manage the money they generate. And they need people to manage them personally. They need to be protected, people like my father. Because if he should go into a depression, let's say—if he botched the job on Sundays, in front of the cameras—then the money would begin drying up. Do you see?"

Hastings nodded. "Of course."

"Okay—" Now she leaned forward. Her eyes had sharpened. On the back of the sofa, her fingers were tightening. The curve of her torso was drawing taut. Gloria Holloway was about to dictate terms:

"Now, in this organization—call it Austin Holloway, Incorporated—there're two people who manage things. There's Herbert Flournoy, who makes most of the business decisions. And then—" Another pause, for emphasis. "And then there's me. What Herbert doesn't take care of, I do."

"Flournoy manages the business end and you manage your father."

Ruefully, she smiled. "I wouldn't say anyone manages my father. Just the opposite, in fact. But I act as a buffer, keep him insulated from petty annoyances. Like this situation, for instance." Now the smile widened disarmingly, focused more personally on him. "It would distract my father if he knew that the police were questioning Elton. And we simply can't afford to have Austin Holloway distracted. It's as simple as that."

"You're also protecting Elton. You're the guardian of the gates. Is that it?"

"That's it," she answered evenly. The two words, spoken so softly, nevertheless conveyed an aura of utter confidence that could only derive, Hastings knew, from the certainty that vast power awaited simply the touch of a forefinger on a phone console. Then, plainly to soften the stark impact of the same two words, she offered: "Besides, Elton is . . ." She searched for the phrase. "He's fragile. Emotionally fragile."

As he looked at her, Hastings let a long, calculated silence lengthen before he said quietly, "I've got to talk to your brother, Miss Holloway. There's no other way. I'm sorry, but that's how it is."

"But *why*? Because he happened to see someone getting mugged? Is that it?"

"It wasn't a mugging." He let another long, harsh moment of silence pass. Then, without fully realizing that he intended to say it, he said, "It wasn't a mugging. It was murder."

Her eyes widened, her mouth tightened. "Murder?"

"A prostitute was murdered last night. It happened a little after ten o'clock, on Mason Street."

"But what's that got to do with—" Her throat closed on the rest of it. At her temple, a pulse was throbbing.

"The description of the suspect fits your brother, Miss Holloway. It could be a coincidence, bad information. But I've got to check it out."

"But—" She began to shake her head. "But I can't—"

"We don't intend to make a lot of fuss. I know about your father, how important he is. That's why I didn't tell your security men about the murder. I'm being as discreet as I can. But I've got to talk to Elton. There's no other way."

She rose, walked quickly to the view window, stood with her back to him, arms rigid at her sides, fists clenched. Her head was high, the line of her body assertive, defiant. Finally she turned to face him.

"Give me time, to—to make some decisions. We're doing The Hour here, at the Cow Palace, on Sunday. And Elton's part

of it. Elton, me, my children, my mother—we've all got to be there, onstage. It—it's the format."

On his feet, facing her, Hastings said, "You've got your problems—but so do I. You understand that, don't you?" As he spoke, he looked at his watch.

"Lieutenant, I—"

"It's four-thirty. I'll be back here at nine-thirty tonight. That's five hours. I'll come back, and I'll ask for you."

She nodded: a stiff, stricken nod. Then: "This prostitute, what was her name?"

"Amy MacFarland."

"And she was killed at ten o'clock last night, you say?"

"That's right. In the Bayside Hotel, just around the corner from here, on Mason Street. She was strangled."

"Strangled?"

He nodded. "She was strangled with a rope, or a cord." He hesitated, then said, "There've been other murders, like this. Other murders in other cities. And they all fit a pattern: same kind of victim, same kind of weapon. And—" Purposefully, he lowered his voice, locked his eyes with hers. "And they were all committed when your organization was in town."

He watched her draw back from him, as if he'd physically threatened her. For a final moment he held her eyes, watching fear begin to work on the musculature of her face. Finally he'd gotten through to her, done the job he'd come to do.

"I'll see you at nine-thirty." He nodded, turned, went to the door.

11

She crossed her legs at the ankles, arranged the folds of her skirt across her thighs and calves, smoothed down the silken fabric of her dress over the swell of her breasts. Careful of her hair, she rested her head against the curved back of the chaise longue.

Many years ago, Austin had told her that she belonged on a chaise longue. It was his image of her, he'd said. It had always been so romantic, his picture of her. When he was away from her, he imagined her as she was now, dressed in a sheer gossamer gown, her hair beautifully done, her face impeccably made up, reclining like Helen of Troy, awaiting his pleasure.

Even then, so long ago, Austin had used words like "gossamer" and phrases like "Helen of Troy." Even when they were alone, just the two of them.

The first time he'd ever said it, told her she belonged on a chaise, dressed in a gossamer gown, they'd been in Detroit, on the first tour they'd ever made together. They'd been staying at the Statler. All of them, all four of them, in the same cramped suite: she and Austin in one room, the children in another room. There'd been no nursemaid, no secretaries, no one but the four of them. Gloria had been—how old? She began to frown, then remembered: an untroubled face was an unwrinkled face.

And then the memory cleared: Elton had been five years old, just beginning kindergarten, on that first tour. So, if Elton had been five, then Gloria would have been nine, four years older.

Even then, they'd been so different, the two of them. From the

moment of their birth, they'd been different. Gloria had always been the active one, the pushy one. Whatever Gloria wanted, she got. Elton had been the quiet one, the watchful one, the delicate one. Right from the first, he'd been—

At the door, a soft knock sounded. Susan's "five o'clock knock," Marvella had secretly decided to call it.

"Come in."

Also formally dressed, Susan Gaines stepped inside, closed the door. In her right hand, she carried a small embroidered satchel. Marvella had bought the satchel on Rodeo Drive, a year or two ago. It had two handles, and opened to just the right dimensions. It had been made in China, and had cost five hundred dollars, she remembered.

"Hello, Susan."

"Hello, Mrs. Holloway." Smiling her social secretary's smile, Susan was brightly nodding.

Without changing position, Marvella watched the other woman move with measured steps to the small mirrored bar. She placed the satchel on the bar, opened the satchel, produced a bottle of vodka. The bottle sparkled and glowed, reflected in the mirrors behind and beneath it. Susan Gaines took a crystal highball glass from a rack, placed the glass beside the bottle. From a silver bucket she took ice, dropping the cubes in the glass with silver tongs. Her fingernails, Marvella noted, were pleasingly polished. Now the bottle was opened, and two ounces of vodka poured into the sparkling crystal glass. Now came the tonic, and the lime. Susan's hands moved deliberately, deftly. Sometimes Marvella suspected that Susan slowed down the tempo of this daily ritual to tease her, even taunt her. But, inevitably, just as the suspicion intruded, the drink was offered, the ceremony completed. Just as now, smiling, holding the glass delicately with her manicured fingers, Susan was coming toward her, bending gracefully from the waist, placing the deliciously tinkling glass on a small table beside the chaise. The table, too, was mirrored, reflecting the glass.

"Happy September twenty-second," Susan was saying, straightening, smiling. "Anything else?"

Marvella smiled in return, shook her head. "No, thank you."

"Shall I look in on you later?"

"I don't think so, Susan I'm feeling tired tonight. I think I'll go to bed early."

"Well, then—good night, Mrs. Holloway." Susan smiled again, turned toward the door, quietly let herself out. With the security men on duty in the hallway outside, Susan would be free for the evening.

As Marvella would be free, too—free from the long hours of waiting for this moment, this time that was the focus of all the hours that had gone before: twenty-four hours, since she'd done what she was doing now, reaching for the day's first drink.

Carefully balanced on high-heeled lounging slippers, Marvella stooped, picked up the empty glass, turned toward the bar. An antique clock hung on the wall behind the bar. No, not an antique, not really an antique. Even in the presidential suite the clock wouldn't be a real antique. Because, if the president stayed here, or his wife, then time would be important. The country would expect it, would demand correct time for the president, not antique time.

She placed the glass on the bar, looked closely at the clock. Time: ten minutes after seven. Two hours and ten minutes since Susan had knocked on her door. Soon there would be another knock: a waiter with her dinner. Two waiters, white-jacketed, bringing her dinner on a cart.

Food, but no wine. She could have had wine if she'd liked. She could have traded the vodka for a bottle of wine, any kind. And sometimes she did, traded vodka for wine.

She poured vodka into the glass, dropped in the ice, added the tonic, squeezed in the lime. Her hands were steady—beautiful hands, Austin always said. Beautiful hands with beautiful rings, beautifully manicured nails.

But the skin of her hands was changing, coarsening. Age, time, trouble—they were changing her skin, changing her. She could feel it inside, the changing. In front of the mirror, naked, she could see it.

She took up the drink, turned, steadied herself, walked back to the chaise, set the glass on the small table, another fake antique. Across the room, the bottle was half empty. It stood like some religious symbol: a glass icon, in its own mirrored niche, sparkling, sparkling.

The highball glass, too, was sparkling, its crystals reflecting the light.

Sitting on the chaise again, but not reclining, she realized she was looking around the sitting room, almost as if she'd never seen it. She was experiencing the same sensation she'd felt earlier in the day, in the limo, driving to City Hall. It was as if she'd materialized as two identical persons, one person observing the other, wondering how that other person came to be there—here—at this time, in this particular place, experiencing these particular sensations, this sudden moment of utter emptiness.

They were strangers, these two identical persons. Odd, dissimilar strangers, sometimes hostile strangers. One of them came clearly from the sunshine and stars of her childhood: the girl in the gingham dress, with only a father to raise her, with her mother in heaven, looking down on them. Always, she'd been alone, that small child, wandering through golden fields, venturing into the quiet woods beyond the creek behind their house. Always alone, but in memory never lonely. Because the child could wander the wondrous landscape of imagination, like Dorothy, in the land of Oz, or Alice, in Wonderland.

But the other person—herself—was always lonely. Now, here—in the limousine, there—even on Sunday, in her place onstage, holding Elton with her left hand and Gloria with her right hand, singing, she felt the emptiness, the terrible loneliness.

When she sang as a child, alone under the bright sky, she sang to God. And she'd never felt the loneliness.

Now, at age forty-nine, with the flesh sagging on her bones and that small, constant voice from the dead never far from the surface of her consciousness, she sang for the small red light beside the camera lens.

She'd sung for both of them—her father, and Austin. One of them dead. Her father, lying facedown in the field of weeds

behind their tabernacle, his face flattened in the bloody dirt of a pathway that led to town, arms flung wide, fingers crooked into the grass, desperately hanging on.

Life and death . . . death and life . . .

The dead she'd seen, each one of them, had changed her life, made her a different person, a stranger to herself. Her mother, lying in the wooden coffin—her father, murdered, sprawled in the dirt—her baby, strangled in her womb—

—and the boy lying on the sidewalk beside his twisted bicycle, his eyes turning to stone as she knelt beside him.

The world—the room—the bottle on the crystal bar—all had faded into the mists of time, disappeared in the darkness behind her closed eyes.

As she opened her eyes, the glass beside her filled the field of her vision; everything else was blurred, out of focus.

Everything.

12

"I'm sorry to've called this meeting without much warning," Holloway said, smiling as he looked around the room. "But Herbert and I were talking while we were stuck in traffic today, going to pick up the key to the city—" To smirks all around, he held up the foot-long key. "—and I thought I should give you my thinking on the objectives, this Sunday—give you the game plan. Now, I know—I'm fully aware—that some of you think it's dumb to bring The Hour to San Francisco." Keeping the smile in place, he once more swept the faces with a genial, eye-crinkled gaze.

"And that's okay," he said, nodding encouragement. "I want that input. I need it. You all know that. But—" Now the smile twisted playfully. The blue eyes danced, the famous face settled into its trademark friendly, folksy expression. "But I don't need it now, four days before the cameras roll."

He waited for the laugh, then allowed the smile to fade. The time for pleasantries had passed. And time was precious.

"As you know," Holloway said, "I'll be meeting tomorrow night with a group of men—fifty-two men, to be exact—who probably have as much influence on the way this country's run as any comparable-size group you could think of, could assemble. Now, some of you -Larry and Gordon, particularly—" He smiled, gestured to the two writers. "—know what I'll be saying tomorrow. But for the benefit of those of you who don't, I'm going to make an opening pitch for the formation of a new political party. Which, God knows, this country needs badly.

Now—" Gracefully, he raised a hand in benediction, acknowledging the on-cue buzz of assent, of excitement, of encouragement. "Now, I'm not going to give the speech, don't worry. But what I wanted to tell you is that the service on Sunday will be a kind of reverse lead-in to this meeting tomorrow night, which I consider to be one of the most important, most significant meetings I've ever called." As he said it, he swept the company with solemn eyes. The smile was gone now. The set of the mouth and chin was uncompromising. With its broad jaw and forehead, with its graceful flow of thick gray hair, the head was transformed, ennobled.

"Now, what do I mean by all this? How do the two tie together, this banquet tomorrow night and The Hour on Sunday?" The rhetorical question was sternly asked. The blue eyes snapped. The set of the chin was firm. The opening moments of calculated levity were now behind them.

"The answer is that, beginning tomorrow night, we're going to start focusing on what's wrong with this country—what's wrong, and what we can do to make it right. No, I'm not going to start in on it now, don't worry—" This time, the smile was fleeting, without warmth, inviting nothing in return but his audience's closer attention. "But I wanted to tell you—warn all of you—that The Hour this Sunday will be something different, a new departure, a new direction for all of us. And if you do your jobs right—publicity, production, planning—" Briefly, his eye fell on the separate department chiefs "—you'll be doing things differently, too, for Sunday. And that'll apply particularly to you, Charlie—" He turned to his publicity director. "—when you're dealing with the media. Because what we'll be doing on Sunday—what I'll be doing—is holding up San Francisco to Christian scrutiny. This city is a hotbed of sin, pure and simple. There's no other city like it in the whole country. And the whole country—the whole world—knows it.

"Now, obviously, I'm not going to make a frontal attack, to use the military vernacular. I'm going to put it that we're saving

the city's soul, praying for its salvation at the bar of God's heavenly justice. In other words, we'll be striving to save this wicked city from itself." He paused, allowing a long, measured moment of calculated silence to pass. "What we'll actually be doing, of course, is playing to the rest of the country, the rest of the world. We'll be playing off San Francisco, in other words. It's a high-risk strategy, I suppose—something we've never tried before. But the truth is, at age sixty-three, I'm feeling that it's about time I take some risks. I think this country is ready for risks. It's ready for some new ideas, some new leadership." A final pause, as he swept the circle one last time with sharply focused eyes. Then: "And I hope you're ready, too."

He waited for the expression of approval and assent to subside, then he asked, "Any questions?"

The first among equals, Charlie Benton raised a forefinger, waited for Holloway's answering nod, then said, "If you can manage it, Austin, I'd like to spend a few minutes with you after we're through here. I'll be meeting with two local reporters in less than an hour. In fact, one of them is a city editor. And I'd like to be sure I'm straight on your thinking for Sunday, on the appeals you want to hit, especially locally."

Holloway glanced at Flournoy, who nodded.

"No problem," Holloway answered. Quickly, Holloway's questioning glance circled the group of a half dozen shirtsleeved men lounging at their ease in the sitting room of his suite. Each man knew that, after the first pro forma post-meeting question, Holloway quickly lost patience with further questions.

"Anything else?" he asked.

When no hands were raised, Holloway beamed at them, waved benevolent dismissal. To confirm his authority, Flournoy lingered behind after the department heads left the room. Ignoring Benton, who frequently displeased him, Flournoy spoke directly to Holloway:

"I'll be back in a half hour, Austin. Gloria wants to see me. Then I'll meet you here. Right?" It was an implied command.

directing that Benton conclude his business in thirty minutes. Signifying acceptance, Holloway nodded.

"Right."

"Drink?" Gloria asked, as Flournoy sat down to face her across a marble cocktail table.

"White wine, please." Appreciatively, Flournoy watched Gloria as she rose, went to the bar, took a bottle of Chardonnay from the small refrigerator, began working with a corkscrew. She was dressed in fawn-colored slacks and a color-coordinated beige sweater. The slacks were cut close, modeling a perfection of thighs, buttocks, and a taut, flat stomach. The sweater was cut full, only hinting at the richness of her breasts, the suppleness of her waist. Like her father, Gloria moved deliberately, decisively, always mindful of the effect she was creating, yet arrogantly indifferent. But if their mannerisms were similar, their objectives differed. Austin sought power. Gloria sought sex. She'd been divorced for two years. On the road, always with her two children, The Hour's sentimental favorites, Gloria never indulged herself, never went looking for bed partners. At home, though, in Beverly Hills, Flournoy was aware that she slipped into her second persona: the female in heat, constantly on the prowl.

But for Austin, and therefore for Flournoy—Gloria had never been a problem. Unlike Marvella, who drank, and Elton, who was grotesquely unpredictable, Gloria managed her vices the way she managed everything else: quietly, efficiently, intelligently. And economically, too. Gloria didn't believe in wasted motion or wasted words. Many times, lying in bed, listening to his wife as she lay beside him, quietly snoring, Flournoy had imagined himself making love to Gloria. Occasionally, if he'd been drinking, and if his wife had denied him, he had actually resolved to speak to Gloria. But the resolve had never survived the cold light of morning, not to mention the cold light in Gloria's eyes as she and Flournoy made the day-to-day, week-to-week decisions essential to the successful operation of the conglomerate that was Austin Holloway.

She filled two stem glasses, corked the bottle, put it away, then carried the glasses across the room. She moved rhythmically, sensually, swinging her hips and her shoulders. Her head was high, her step was light, yet decisive. Even though Flournoy realized that these visual pleasures weren't consciously offered to him, he nevertheless welcomed this shared moment, a much needed balm after a long, demanding day.

But when he accepted the glass, and looked for the first time directly into her eyes, he saw the urgency, saw her deep apprehension.

Something had gone wrong.

Perhaps badly wrong.

He watched her sit in a Regency armchair. She drank some of the wine, and placed the glass on the coffee table. Then she leaned back, crossed her legs, gripped both arms of the chair and began to speak:

"While you and my father were out this afternoon, a police lieutenant named Hastings got up here, in the hallway."

Watching her over the rim of his glass, speculating on the possible connection between a police lieutenant and whatever was disturbing her, Flournoy decided not to respond. Soon, it would all come clear.

"He's from Homicide. And he's investigating the murder of a prostitute. It happened last night, just a couple of blocks from here." As she paused, Flournoy could see the muscles of her throat tighten. He watched her draw a deep, meaningful breath, saw her eyes sharpen, focused on him. As she always did, Gloria delivered the decisive stroke softly, sibilantly:

"He wanted to talk to Elton."

Flournoy was satisfied with his response, delivered in a voice that was as calm as Gloria's:

"About the murder, you mean."

She nodded—once. "That's right. About the murder."

"And did he talk with Elton?"

"No. But he's coming back. Tonight. At nine-thirty, he said."

"*Christ.*" Abruptly he drained his glass, then reflexively

looked at his watch. The time was twenty minutes to eight. There was no point in asking her why she hadn't told him when he'd first returned to the hotel—why, in fact, she hadn't called him in the limo. *"Christ!"*

"It looks like this is the fourth time it's happened," she said. "Milwaukee—Dallas—Pittsburgh—" Still focused sharply on his face, her eyes held steady. Remorselessly steady.

"There was never anything definitive. Nothing to incriminate Elton."

"There is now, apparently."

"What d'you mean?" Asking the question, he could clearly hear the tremor of dread in his voice. Could she hear it, too?

"I mean," she answered, "that the police seem to have evidence against him."

"Are you sure? Did they tell you about it, this evidence?"

She shook her head. "No. But they wouldn't. They wouldn't tell us what they know. Not till they talk to Elton."

Grimly, Flournoy stared down at his empty glass. Would she offer him a refill, for God's sake? With everything suddenly in jeopardy, with the whole house of cards teetering, wasn't she going to refill his glass?

"Any ideas?" she asked.

"First," he said, "we've got to call Harlan, tell him what's happened, find out where we stand legally. Harlan's got to come up here. He can be here in three hours. Meanwhile, we keep Elton away from them, from the police. We—" He broke off, drew a ragged breath. Was he revealing a momentary indecision, faltering in front of Austin's daughter? Before he realized that he was going to say it, he heard himself complaining: "You should've gotten in touch, Gloria. Sooner. You should've gotten on the mobile phone. If they show up here in an hour and a half, with a warrant, do you realize what could happen? Have you any idea?"

Ignoring the complaint, she said, "We've got to think beyond now, today. This has been coming on for a long time, trouble like this. We've been ignoring it, putting our heads in the sand."

"The first thing to do is keep Elton away from the police. Maybe we should put him on a plane to Los Angeles. Now. Right now. Right this minute. We've got to get him in a car. Not a limo, but a car. We've got to get him to the airport. There're flights leaving every half hour for Los Angeles. Until midnight, there're flights leaving every half hour." As he said it, he could feel certainty returning, his habitual assurance, projecting clear, calm command. Yes, his lapse had only been momentary, a mere aberration. To drive home his demand he nodded decisively. "Yes, that'll be the best. I'll tell Mitchell, tell him to arrange it He can assign two men, to make sure Elton gets on the airplane. And Mitchell can arrange to have him met in Los Angeles, taken to Harlan, immediately." Reviewing the plan, he lapsed into silence. Then, vehemently, he nodded, repeating: "Yes, that's best, the best plan. So we won't have to get Harlan up here, after all. We'll ship Elton to Harlan, let Harlan work it out. Then we can—" Once more he broke off, this time pointing to the empty glass. "Have you got some bourbon—bourbon and water?"

Silently, Gloria rose, took the empty glass to the bar, made the drink, placed it in front of him, resumed her seat. In her eyes, he saw the stillness of quiet contempt.

"What about Dad?" she said. "What do we tell him? What excuse'll we give him, for Elton not being there on Sunday, onstage?"

He drank half the highball, then said, "First we've got to decide between ourselves, you and I, what we think is best. Then we'll tell Austin what we think, what we recommend. As always."

For a moment she made no reply, gave no sign that she'd heard Instead, she sat motionless, her wine forgotten, silently staring at him. Then, speaking in a slow, measured voice, she said, "What about telling Dad the truth? Just the simple truth?"

"Gloria, we can't do that now. Tomorrow Austin's got one of the most important meetings of his life. You know that. And then there's Sunday. And this city, too. It's—"

"There's always the next Sunday, Herbert. You know that.

And I know it, too. That's what this is all about, really—a lifetime of Sundays." She still spoke slowly, with infinite reluctance. Then: "We arrived here Monday afternoon. Last night—Tuesday—Elton went out for a while, alone. He was gone from nine forty-five till about ten-thirty. I checked with our people, Mitchell's men. That's what they told me. Today, a detective arrives. He tells me a whore was murdered, when Elton was out. And he—"

"We're not sure that—"

"We *are* sure, Herbert," she interrupted fiercely. "You and I, we're sure. We know what happened. We *know*. And we know this same thing happened in Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh, and Dallas. Except that the police didn't come then. But it was in the papers, on the radio, whatever. It *happened*, for God's sake. It happened three times, at least. We get into town, and a prostitute is murdered—strangled. And Elton's out when they're strangled. He's always unaccounted for when they're killed. And he's always—"

"But that's not *proof*," he protested. "That's—"

She raised a furious hand, commanding his instant silence. Her eyes were fierce, her voice was harsh, half choked with a rush of sudden anger. "I'm not talking about proof, Herbert. I'm talking about the truth. I'm talking about what *happened*—and what *will* happen. And I'm also talking about the whores that've been dying in Los Angeles the last year. I'm talking about the whores who've been strangled while Elton's been—"

"Gloria, this is speculation, don't you see that? There's nothing to connect Elton to any of this. It could be a—a stagehand, a cameraman, that's killing these women. Don't you—"

"Elton is crazy, Herbert. He's a fucking maniac—a very quiet, very cagey lunatic." Momentarily, she broke off. Then, measuring the words with icy precision, she said: "He's crazy, and my mother's a drunk. Every Sunday, you and I get Elton's attention, and get my mother dried out. We get them dressed, and give them the hymn number, and we prop them up in front of the camera—

them, and me, and my kids. We cast our eyes up to heaven, and we sing. It hasn't changed since I was a little girl. Elton was just starting to sing —and my mother was just starting to drink. And I was starting to see how—how grotesque it was, what happened. I—" Suddenly she broke off, blinked, shook her head, reached for her wine glass. She drained the glass. In silence, eyes gravely downcast, she replaced the empty glass on the marble table. When she spoke again, her voice was husky:

"I don't know why I bother. I don't know why I don't just take my kids and move somewhere. Anywhere."

"For one thing," Flournay said, "he's your father. He loves you."

She laughed. Harshly. Bitterly. "Except for an hour on Sunday, he hardly knows I exist. He's a megalomaniac, Herbert. Don't you understand that? He *believes* that crap he preaches. He thinks God talks to him, tells him what to say."

"Forget about love, then," Flournoy said quietly. "What about money? What about your Mercedes, Gloria, and your house in Coldwater Canyon? That's part of it, too—the things that money can buy."

She raised her eyes to meet his. Now, heavily ironic, she smiled wearily. "I've never really liked you, Herbert. But I'll say this—you've got a gift for analysis, for getting to the heart of the matter. It's not always flattering. But it's usually accurate."

"What about Elton, Gloria? You say this detective is coming back at nine-thirty. We can't let them talk. I've got to call Harlan, find out where we stand. I think they need a warrant to interrogate someone."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. You're thinking about a search warrant. But I think the police can interrogate anyone if they have probable cause. I don't think they can get in his room without his permission, unless they have a warrant. But if they catch him on the street, or downstairs in the lobby—" She let it go ominously unfinished.

"Either way, we need time. I'll talk to Mitchell. He can take Elton to another hotel. Are there policemen downstairs, in the lobby?"

"I don't know."

"Jesus—" Flournoy shook his head. "There're reporters downstairs. If there're policemen in the lobby, too, and the reporters find out about it, and start asking questions—" Grimly, he shook his head, then abruptly rose. "I've got to call Harlan, then get together with Mitchell. I'll get back to you." Quickly he strode to the door. Still seated, Gloria did not reply, did not look at Flournoy as he left.

13

"I don't agree. We've got a better chance if we keep him here, in the hotel. If we try to take him away, and they catch us . . ." Mitchell spread his broad, knob-knuckled hands, shook his big, grizzled head.

Talking softly, urgently, the two men stood at one end of the eleventh-floor corridor. Flournoy was in shirtsleeves, his tie loosened. Behind rimless glasses, his eyes were aggressively sharp-focused. As always, Mitchell wore a blue suit, serviceable black shoes, a white shirt, a plain tie. His broad, peasant's face was impassive. If Flournoy looked the part of a harried behind-the-scenes political kingmaker, Mitchell looked like a KGB man.

"Listen, Lloyd, I've just talked with Harlan. I'm acting on his advice. He's a corporation counsel, for God's sake. We pay him to take care of things like this. And he says we've got to get Elton out and hide him. Now. Right now."

"Have you talked to Austin?"

"No. I haven't had a chance. That's because—" Flournoy lowered his voice, stepped closer. "That's because I just got all this from Gloria, about the detective being here. Not more than a half hour ago."

"We can't take Elton away without telling Austin." Mitchell spoke slowly, heavily, with impassive conviction. His small eyes remained fixed on Flournoy's face.

"Listen, Lloyd—" Visibly, Flournoy was restraining himself. "You're Austin's security chief. You're responsible for him, for his peace of mind, as well as his physical well-being. You're

probably closer to Austin than anyone, granted. And he trusts you, too, also granted. But I'm telling you that—"

"I won't take Elton anywhere. Not unless Austin tells me."

Flournoy's voice dropped to a furious hiss. "Don't you understand what I'm telling you? Don't you understand that these people might arrest Elton for murder? Can you imagine the consequences?" A short, outraged pause. Then the vehement demand: "Well, *can* you?"

Unmoved, Mitchell answered, "You've been trying to keep things from Austin for a long time. That was a mistake. But this'll only make matters worse, taking Elton away. And I'm not getting involved. Not unless Austin wants me to get involved."

"Do *you* want to tell Austin what's happened?"

Mitchell's shoulders raised, signifying both indifference and assent. "Gloria should do it. But if she won't, and you won't, then I'll do it."

"But it—it's nine o'clock, for God's sake. They'll be here in a half hour. How the hell can we—"

"It should've been done a long time ago. You're trying to protect Austin because of the service Sunday. And the meeting tomorrow. But that only makes everything worse, putting things off. You make excuses. Austin does, too. He doesn't see what he doesn't want to see. And now he's in trouble."

"*We're* in trouble. *All* of us."

"Elton has always been—" Mitchell broke off, ponderously searching for the word. "He's always been strange."

"*Strange?*" Bitterly, Flournoy looked at his watch. "That's putting it mildly."

"I'll do my best to keep the police from questioning him," Mitchell said. "If he stays in his room, we should be all right, at least for tonight. But then we'll tell him, tell Austin. I won't keep this from him. It'll only be worse for Austin in the long run if we don't tell him."

Silently, desperately incredulous, Flournoy searched the big man's face. Finally he said, "You're loyal, Lloyd. I'll say that."

Making no reply, Mitchell turned away.

14

"Do we have a plan?" Hastings asked as they walked toward the entrance of the St. Francis.

"Of course we have a plan," Friedman said. "We're going to keep the lowest possible profile while we get the goods on Elton Holloway."

"If this gets into the papers before Dwyer knows what we're doing . . ." Ominously, Hastings let it go unfinished.

"That's why we're keeping a low profile," Friedman answered airily. "Just keep saying no comment if a reporter shows up. That's the plan."

Shaking his head, Hastings pushed through the revolving door into the lobby, followed by Friedman. Sitting close to the doors, Canelli rose to his feet, smiling expectantly. But Friedman pointedly looked away, ignoring the younger man as he and Hastings joined the stream of animated, well-dressed men and women entering the hotel through the Powell Street entrance

"So now what?" Hastings asked.

Friedman pointed to the elevators. "For openers, we'll use their elevator code, get off at the eleventh floor. That'll throw them off balance. Then we'll proceed to capitalize on our advantage, as the situation permits."

"Hmmm."

"I'll do the talking," Friedman said. "You look determined."

"Hmmm."

"We're policemen," Friedman said, showing his shield to the

two security men. "We want to see Elton Holloway. He's expecting us." As he spoke, he saw one of the guards take a small surveillance radio from his pocket as the second man moved to block Friedman's way.

"You'll have to talk to Mr. Mitchell," the second guard said. "Lloyd Mitchell. He's chief of security."

"Fine." Agreeably, Friedman pocketed his shield case, looked expectantly down the long, quiet corridor. "Where is he?" As he asked the question, he saw a door open, midway along the corridor. A big, solidly built man appeared. The big man's thick, graying hair and seamed face put his age at about sixty. As he came closer, Friedman took his automatic policeman's inventory: big, muscular shoulders, a square-cut head set low on a wrestler's neck, stevedore's hands carried away from the body, fingers half clenched. The face was a serf's. Beneath heavy brows, the small eyes were watchful. This was a quiet man, an uncompromising man—a dangerous man.

With Hastings beside him, Friedman faced the big man in the blue suit. "Mr. Mitchell?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm Lieutenant Peter Friedman. This is Lieutenant Frank Hastings. We're co-commanders of the homicide detail, in San Francisco."

Looking at the two men briefly in turn, Mitchell impassively nodded.

"Are your people licensed for security work, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Yes, sir. We have licenses from Los Angeles and the State of California. I have the licenses in my room."

"How many of your men carry firearms?"

"I do. And two others." Mitchell gestured to one of the two security men who stood shoulder to shoulder, at parade rest, attentively watching. "Mr. Wagner has a permit, too."

Wagner nodded. Like Mitchell's, his face was expressionless.

"Can I ask you what kind of weapons you carry?" Friedman asked, his eyes on Mitchell.

"We carry Smith & Wesson .357 magnums, with four-inch barrels. All three of us."

Approvingly, Friedman nodded. "Good choice." Then, signifying that the preliminaries were concluded, he let a moment of silence pass, let his police smile slowly fade before he said, "As you probably know, Mr. Mitchell, we're here to talk to Elton Holloway."

The large, centurion's head with its close-cropped graying hair gravely inclined. "You were here earlier." The dark, opaque eyes turned to Hastings. "You talked to Miss Holloway. She explained things to you, told you how it is here."

"We're investigating the strangulation of a prostitute," Friedman said. "She was killed Tuesday night, a little after ten o'clock. We have a witness who saw Elton Holloway with the victim approximately fifteen minutes before she was killed. So, naturally, we've got to talk to Elton. He could have some valuble information for us."

"I'll talk to him," Mitchell said. "Then I'll call you."

"No." Slowly, gravely, Friedman shook his head. "No, that's not good enough. Lieutenant Hastings was willing to go along with you earlier. But now we've got our orders." As he spoke, a nearby door opened. Turning, Friedman saw a young, attractive, determined woman. She was looking directly at Hastings. Her eyes were angry; her voice was low and tight. "Can I talk to you, Lieutenant? Privately?"

Hastings looked at Friedman, waiting for his silent cue. He saw Friedman's tongue circling the inside of his mouth, the definitive sign that Friedman was deep in thought. Finally Friedman nodded. To Gloria, sternly, he said, "Fifteen minutes. No more."

With only a contemptuous glance at Friedman, Gloria turned abruptly back into her room, leaving the door open. Hastings followed her inside, closed the door, crossed the room to sit in the same chair he'd taken earlier in the day. Tonight, Gloria was dressed in a pleated flannel skirt and tweed jacket. She wore stockings, but no shoes. Like her expression, her voice was cold:

"We've talked to our lawyers, Lieutenant. They tell us that if you have probable cause you can question Elton, and there's

nothing we can do to stop you." She let a long, hostile beat pass. "Do you have probable cause?"

"Definitely."

"What is it, this probable cause? What's the evidence?"

"I don't have to give you that information. Not until he's charged with a crime. And I'm not doing that, not charging him."

"Then—"

"He's a material witness," Hastings said. "For now, that's his status. But your lawyers will tell you that we have the same rights where a material witness is concerned as we do if we're questioning a suspect in a capital crime."

"He can't be questioned unless he has a lawyer present."

"No, that's not right. If he's a suspect—if I've given him his Miranda rights—then he can demand that a lawyer be present. But not now, not as a material witness."

"That's not what our lawyers say."

Hastings shrugged. "You have your lawyers, we have ours." He watched her for a moment, then quietly added, "I'm talking about the DA."

"Listen, Lieutenant—" Eyes hard, mouth firmly set, she leaned forward in her chair. The message: Gloria Holloway couldn't—wouldn't—be intimidated. "Let's be honest with each other."

"Fine."

"You know that my father is a very important man. That's a cliché in your business, I know—people talking about how important they are, how much they pay in taxes, how much trouble they could make for you. But the thing about clichés is, they're usually true, have some basis in fact. My father *is* very important. You might not believe it, how important he is, how much clout he has."

"I'm not about to bother your father. I just want to talk with your brother. That's all. For now, that's all we want, just to talk with him." Eyes locked with hers, Hastings let a long, measured beat pass before he said, "I'm not going to threaten him with arrest, and I'm not going to take him downtown. I'm not going to

put undue pressure on him. I'm simply going to talk to him. It's important that you understand that, important that you *all* understand that."

Speaking very slowly, very distinctly, she said, "Our chief lawyer is in Los Angeles. His name is Harlan Collins. Mr. Collins has called a colleague of his, a Mr. Richard Wertheimer. Does that name ring a bell?"

Hastings nodded. "Richard Wertheimer is probably the best criminal lawyer in San Francisco."

"That's right. And he says that you've got to have a warrant to question Elton."

"That's not true. Under certain circumstances, we need a warrant to enter his room. But we don't need anything to question him. So—"

"Mr. Wertheimer is on his way over here right now. And his advice to me was that I should stand in front of Elton's door—his room is 1106, by the way. I should stand in front of his door and make you remove me physically if you want to see Elton. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

Momentarily, the imaginary pleasure of wrestling with Gloria Holloway distracted Hastings, brought a twitch of humor to the corners of his mouth. He gave himself a moment, then said, "Driving over here from headquarters, Lieutenant Friedman and I talked about this—about what would happen if you go against us. And we decided what we'd do." Watching her, seeing the determination so plain on her face, in the lines of her body, he let the moment lengthen, let the pressure build. Then, "What we decided was, we'd call, say, six uniformed men to come to the lobby downstairs. That's three cars, two men to a car. We'd get them together in the lobby, and we'd give them their orders, tell them the situation, tell them we've got a material witness on the eleventh floor that we have to put under close surveillance. We'll need more than six, come to think about it, if we're going to cover the elevators, and the staircases. Then Lieutenant Friedman and I will take, say, four more uniformed men, and we'll go upstairs—where we'll do our duty. If you decide to bar our way, there'll be a couple of men to take you downstairs, through the

lobby. You'll be taken downtown, and booked for interfering with a policeman in the lawful pursuit of his duty.

"Then, if Elton won't allow us entry, we'll have to stake out the eleventh floor, of course, wait until we can get him outside his room. That'll take, say, another half dozen men, plus the half dozen we'd leave in the lobby, in reserve. They'd all be uniformed men, of course. Big, conspicuous, uniformed men doing their duty." He broke off, decided to smile. "Do you get the picture? Do you see what the media might think, seeing all that action? Can you imagine the scene at police headquarters while your expensive lawyer's getting you out on bail? Can you imagine what the hotel people will think, seeing all those cops in the lobby, and up here, on the eleventh floor?"

Eyes snapping, breathing harshly, she suddenly rose, confronting him.

"You bastard."

He let the smile widen. "It's your choice, Miss Holloway. If you intend to block your brother's door, tell me now." He pointed to a nearby phone. "All it takes is one call. And the response time, in this part of town, will surprise you."

"You son of a bitch."

"I'm trying to forget you're saying these things, Miss Holloway."

"If you weren't a policeman . . ."

"But I am. That's the whole point. I am."

15

Reflexively unbuttoning his sports jacket and loosening his revolver in its holster, Hastings pressed the button beside the door of room 1106. At his side, Friedman also stood with his hand on the butt of his revolver.

"Assuming that he's there," Friedman said softly, "someone sure as hell has called him, warned him not to answer the door." As he spoke, Friedman looked down the corridor, where the two security men stood shoulder to shoulder, watching. Gloria Holloway and Lloyd Mitchell had chosen to return to their separate rooms.

Hastings pressed the button again, stepped closer to the door, listening.

"Maybe you should knock," Friedman said. He smiled. "Do the old room service dodge."

As Hastings raised his fist, ready to knock, the door opened. Surprised, Hastings stepped a half step backward. Then, automatically, he took out his shield case, showed the badge.

"Elton Holloway?"

Dancer Browne's description had been a good one: a slightly built man of medium height, dark blond hair, a pale, expressionless face. The mouth was small, with colorless lips. The brown eyes were utterly empty, strangely fixed. The voice was a monotone:

"My sister said you were coming. She just called me."

"Can we come in?" Hastings stepped firmly forward.

Without replying, Elton Holloway turned, walked into the

small single room. He walked woodenly, mechanically, arms straight down at either side, shoulders squared, head held rigidly, an overgrown boy playing at being a soldier, his back ramrod straight, marching on dress parade. Entering the room behind Hastings, Friedman surreptitiously bolted the door. The three men sat in separate straight-backed chairs, facing each other. Friedman spoke first:

"We won't take much of your time, Mr. Holloway. We—"

"Elton. Call me Elton."

Gravely, Friedman nodded, then smiled his policeman's smile, calculated to disarm. "Good. Thank you, Elton. I'm Lieutenant Friedman. Peter Friedman." He gestured. "This is Lieutenant Frank Hastings." He nodded again, smiled again, then asked, "Did your sister tell you what it is that we'd like to ask you about?"

"No."

"Well," Friedman said, "it concerns a murder that Lieutenant Hastings and I are investigating. The victim's name was Amy MacFarland. She was killed last night, just about this time, as a matter of fact. She was a prostitute. We think she picked up a man on Mason Street, just two and a half blocks from here. She took him to the Bayside Hotel, to a room she used. We think the man we're looking for strangled her in that hotel room. Then we think he left the same way he went in, and walked back the way he came, north on Mason Street. And we think it's possible—" He let a beat pass. "We think it's possible that he came here, to the St. Francis."

As Friedman spoke, Hastings watched the suspect, whose empty eyes remained inexorably fixed on Friedman. "Stone eyes." Dancer Browne had said. Privately, Hastings smiled, mentally scored another point for The Dancer. If he'd chosen to play by the rules, Dancer Browne would probably have an office with a view—and a luscious white secretary, of course.

"Can you help us with any of this?" Friedman asked. He let another moment of silence pass. Then: "We understand you were on Mason Street last night between ten and ten-thirty. Is that right?"

Elton Holloway remained motionless in his chair. The hands resting on the arms of the chair were inert, the muscles of the neck were relaxed, the head was rigid, held unnaturally high. In the silence that followed, the eerily empty eyes turned briefly toward Hastings, then returned to Friedman. The voice was unchanged: an expressionless monotone.

"I don't know the name of the street. Was it Mason, did you say?"

Friedman nodded. "Mason. Right. And the name of the hotel was the Bayside."

Slowly, woodenly, Elton Holloway shook his head. "I don't know the name of the hotel, either." Still with his eyes fixed on Friedman, he sat silently, still utterly motionless. Then: "I often do that, you know. Tonight, I was going to do it, too—what I did last night."

Involuntarily, Friedman and Hastings exchanged a cop's closed, covert look. Was it possible? Was this strange-looking, strange-acting son of Austin Holloway about to confess to murder?

Both detectives turned their eyes to the suspect. For a long, time-suspended moment, neither man could frame the make-or-break question that must follow. Finally, tentatively, Hastings ventured, "Her name was Amy MacFarland. Do you remember that, remember her name?"

"No—" The narrow head moved in a slow arc of delayed denial. "No, I never know their names. It's not necessary, you see, that I know their names."

"Will you—" Momentarily, Hastings's throat closed. Had he ever been so close to a confession that would make headlines across the country, around the world? "Will you tell us what happened, Elton? Never mind about her name. Just tell us how it went—what happened, last night."

Incredibly, with only a moment's hesitation, the suspect said, "I remember that I went out the front entrance of the hotel, on Powell Street. And I remember turning right. I turned right, and then I turned left, I remember, at the next corner. I'd been there before, the night before. So I knew I'd found it, you see—found

the place where it all begins. That's so important, you know. It's like Africa. That's where they think life began, you know. So if you're going to understand life, you must go to Africa."

Very seriously, as though he were deeply interested, Friedman asked, "Have you ever been to Africa, Elton?"

"Oh, yes—" Slowly, gravely, he nodded: a single solemn inclination of his head. "And I've seen it, the Rift Valley. That's where it all began. It's the cradle of civilization, you know."

Still nodding, Friedman was studiously frowning, as if he were struggling to comprehend the depth of the suspect's wisdom. "I see . . ." He hesitated, then asked, "Can we go back a minute? There's something I want to ask."

"Certainly."

"You say you found the place, here in the city, where it all begins. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. Exactly right."

"Well, then, my question is, what's 'it'? That's what I can't follow."

"It's sin," came the prompt answer. "That's the thing about Africa, you see. If you're going to study humanity, you must go to where humanity began. And if you're going to study sin, especially if you're going to fight sin, then you've got to know where it starts. Because there's a place in every city, you know—even towns, if they're big enough. There's always a center, the very center, of sin. I can understand that you're having trouble understanding. Because it took me years, before I could find the center." Dreamily, he nodded, momentarily lost in reverie. "But now, I'm able to go right to it, right to the center of sin. Sometimes, like Monday, I feel as if I—I'm—" He broke off again, allowing his eyes to wander far away. Friedman and Hastings exchanged another look that hardly concealed their growing excitement.

"I feel like I'm—" Another pause. Then, confessing: "I feel electrified." Quickly, perhaps shyly, he looked at Friedman. For the first time, the pale face registered emotion: a kind of hesitant anxiety. "That sounds strange, I know."

"No—no—" Hastily, Friedman raised a reassuring hand.

"Not at all. I've felt the same thing myself. After all—" He gestured again. "We're all made of electricty. Everyone knows that. So it's only getting back to the source, really, when you feel like that. Electrified, I mean. It's like . . . well—" Momentarily he broke off, searching for the phrase. "It's like the Rift Valley. It's exactly the same. Elemental, I mean."

"Have you ever been to the Rift Valley?" Elton asked.

"Well, no," Friedman admitted. "But you don't have to go, you know. You don't have to see it. All you need to do is—" Friedman hesitated, then decided to gamble: "All you have to do is read your Bible. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," the suspect answered, nodding heavily. "Yes, that's so. Exactly."

"Let's get back to Monday night," Hastings said. "You were telling us about finding the center of sin, the city's sin, on Mason Street. I'm curious. What do you do, once you find the center?"

Elton frowned, this time registering mild annoyance as he turned his attention to Hastings. "I talk to them, of course. I find the one—the right one—and I talk to her, hold up the mirror, for her to see."

"Ah—" Hastings nodded. "The mirror."

"Is it a real mirror?" Friedman asked. "A mirror on the wall, for instance?"

"It's not real. It's nothing you can touch. It's not like that." The frown returned, as the suspect began looking steadily at Friedman. Vexation darkened the round brown eyes.

"You're the mirror," Hastings said. "You. You're the mirror. You make them look at themselves."

For the first time, Elton gave Hastings his full attention.

"Of course I'm their mirror. They sin, so they can't see, not by themselves. They're blind. Morally blind."

Slowly, Hastings nodded, then said, "So Monday, you—you were on Mason Street, looking around. You had to find the center of the city's sin. And then you went back last night. Tuesday. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm interested—" Still playing the part of the puzzled

disciple struggling to understand the master, Friedman leaned forward. His expression was studious. "What do you do, exactly, once you've found the center? Do you talk to them, talk to the sinners?"

"Of course I talk to them," came the impatient reply. "But first they talk to me. That's very important, that they talk first. They talk, and I answer. Sometimes it's just a word, one word. But that's all that's necessary, sometimes. Just one word. I know, after one word. And she knows, too. It's contact, that's all. Just contact. That's all that's important, then."

"And what happens, after you've made contact?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You punish them," Hastings said. "Isn't that it—what you do to sinners? Don't you punish them for what they do—for their wickedness?"

Once more, the suspect turned to face Hastings. Elton's eyes, his face remained expressionless, utterly empty. "Punish them?"

Hastings nodded. "If they're sinners—whores—they've got to be punished." He spread his hands. "It's only logical."

Beneath their pale, expressionless surface, the suspect's facial muscles began to tighten. Behind the brown eyes, a pinpoint of pale, manic fire was kindling.

"They've got to be saved. Not punished. *Saved*. My father works on the stage, in front of cameras. But my mission is the streets. I—"

The sharp sound of a buzzer interrupted, followed by a knocking on the hallway door. Suppressing a sharp obscenity, Hastings quickly opened the door. Flanked by Mitchell, a stocky, well-dressed man with truculent eyes stood in the doorway. In his right hand he held a business card, aggressively offered. His voice was harsh: "I'm Richard Wertheimer. I've been retained by the Holloway family to represent Elton Holloway." He looked past Hastings, into the room, then spoke again to Hastings. "Have you charged my client with anything?"

"No. He could be a material witness, though. That's why we're questioning him."

"For your sake, officer, I hope Elton Holloway gave you permission to enter his room."

"He let us in. We identified ourselves, and he let us in."

Wertheimer stepped forward, forcing Hastings to give ground as he strode into the sitting room. The lawyer stood motionless for a moment, looking down at Elton Holloway, who remained seated, staring up at Wertheimer with his blank eyes. Without troubling to look at the two detectives, Wertheimer announced, "You'll have to leave now, gentlemen. I'll need an hour, at least, with my client. Then we can talk, if you want. The four of us."

16

Parked in front of a fireplug on Powell Street, Hastings and Friedman sat in Friedman's elderly Datsun station wagon. At eleven o'clock on a warm September night, Union Square was populated with a seasonal mix of sightseers, theatergoers, and other citizens of the night. In the next block ahead, a line of taxicabs inched toward the St. Francis entrance, where a uniformed doorman presided. Crowded with festive tourists, one cable car was trundling down the Powell Street hill. Another cable car was approaching from the opposite direction.

Inside the Datsun, Friedman slapped the dashboard with the flat of his hand. "What we've got here," he said, "is a genuine, twenty-four-carat loonie. And I say that, first thing in the morning, we get warrants. We get his room fingerprinted, and we take a look for that rope. We can get Dancer, too, and see if he recognizes any of Elton's clothes. We impound the clothes, and test them for fiber matches from the Bayside."

"The theory's great," Hastings said. "*If* we can get the warrants."

Moodily, Friedman made no response.

"We almost had him," Hastings said bitterly. "Another ten minutes, and he'd've been telling us how he does it—saves their souls by purifying them, something like that. We had one like him a couple of years ago, remember? That Jesus freak, who liberated old ladies from their earthly problems—after he raped them?"

"Actually," Friedman said drily, "he liberated them from their

earthly cares and *then* raped them." Remembering, Friedman incredulously shook his head, then said, "There's no way we're going to talk to Elton without a lawyer present. Not with Wertheimer in the game. We've got as much of his story as we're ever going to get, at least until we get him locked up."

"*If* we get him locked up." With a clenched fist, frustrated, Hastings tapped his knee.

"We need those warrants," Friedman said. "And we also need a plan. They're going to stall, sure as hell, maybe move him around, or get him out of the city. And, downtown, the brass'll be just as happy to see Sunday come, see them leave town."

"You think so?"

"Yes," Friedman answered heavily. "I think so. Dwyer's a publicity hound, admittedly. But he's always got his finger out there, in the wind. And I don't think he wants to arrest Austin Holloway's son. Not now. Not ever."

"They might move Elton around, but they also might want him here for the Sunday performance. It's a tradition, you know, the whole family on stage."

"I wonder whether Austin Holloway knows what's happening," Friedman mused. "I think Gloria knows. And Lloyd Mitchell, too, probably. But I wonder whether Holloway himself knows that his kid kills prostitutes?"

"We'll probably never know," Hastings answered.

"We've got to stir Elton up," Friedman said, "maybe catch him in the act. He admits that he was out on Monday. And we know he was out last night. If we give him room, he might go out tomorrow night. Or maybe even tonight, who knows?"

"If he knows we're following him, though, he's going to be careful."

"Maybe not. Maybe it'll work just the opposite, in fact. This guy's listening to voices. He's a nut. I'll bet he thinks he's God's chosen messenger. And characters like that—nuts—the harder you push, the harder they push back sometimes. For all we know, right this minute, he could be putting his rope in his pocket, getting ready to go out and save another sinner, never mind that he knows we're watching."

"So you're saying that we *shouldn't* try for an arrest warrant?"

"I'm thinking," Friedman said, "that maybe we should put Elton under surveillance. Tight surveillance, so he'll know he's being followed. If I'm right that Elton thinks he's God's messenger, above earthly law, then he's going to go right ahead with his plans, whether or not he thinks he's being followed. Remember, he's crazy. Why else would he have told us so much, just now?"

"It's a gamble."

Cheerfully, Friedman shrugged. "So's life a gamble."

Hastings looked at the entrance of the St. Francis, a half block away. "God, wouldn't that be something if we could catch him in the act?"

"For that pleasure," Friedman said, "I'd gladly give whatever chance I have of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven."

"You're an atheist."

"Which is exactly why I'd love to stick out my foot, and trip Austin Holloway, and watch him fall flat on his sanctimonious ass."

Conscious of a changed note in the other man's voice, Hastings turned to look at Friedman. Staring straight ahead, Friedman's eyes had slipped into thoughtful soft focus. His voice, too, was thoughtfully soft as he said, "You know, everyone worries about who's going to drop the bomb—where, and when. But I'm here to tell you that, whoever pushes the button, whenever it happens, wherever, there's going to be someone like Holloway right at the button-pusher's elbow. Because the politicians and the generals always have God with them, you know. It doesn't matter which side you're on, you've always got God. That's because there're always people like Holloway on both sides, screaming for the blood of the sinners. Which means, of course, that thousands of brave young men die. Men, and boys —" Slowly, with infinite regret, he shook his head, softly repeating: "Boys. They're killing twelve-year-old boys in the Middle East. The goddamn holy men give them guns, and tell them God commands them to—" Abruptly, he broke off, still staring sightlessly straight ahead. Then, speaking very softly, he said, "I've never been

much for walking in peace marches. I don't have the figure for it, for one thing. And I'm not very good about sending checks to the right causes, either. But I'll tell you this —" He drew a long, deep breath. "If I can tie a can to Austin Holloway, I'll consider that I'll have paid my dues."

17

Her legs were heavy, her head was falling forward, bobbing up, falling forward again. Her eyelids, too, were heavy. The lines of the room were shifting, blurring, shaped and reshaped, sliding away, returning, fading again.

So she had to get up.

Because suddenly the room was her prison.

The room, the hotel, The Hour . . .

And all the hours before, and all the hours to come, all bearing down upon her like beasts of prey, white fangs dripping red, baleful yellow eyes glowing in a midnight circle surrounding her. Soon, she knew, the shape and substance of the beasts would come clear: huge, black, snarling dogs, raging, slavering, dripping red-frothed foam from blood-flecked fangs.

When the bottle was empty, the circle of terror materialized, turned into formless monsters, then wolves, then dogs—and finally into the one dog from out of her childhood. Mr. Weldon's dog, a black monster, leaping on her, forepaws on her shoulders, teeth sunk into the flesh of her upper arm. Her father had come running, brandishing a hoe like an Indian with a spear, his shouts of outrage mingling with her terrified screams. The blade of the hoe had torn flaps of bloody flesh from the dog, black and blood-red flaps, one flap from his flank, one flap from his head, leaving the ear hanging. Her screams—her father's shouts—the dog's howls of pain—banshee sounds from the crimson maw of hell, all echoing and reechoing down through all the years, the sights and the sounds of constant nightmares.

She'd been eight years old when Mr. Weldon's dog had snapped his chain and come for her.

She'd been sixteen when she'd first met Austin.

They'd been standing in front of their tabernacle, her daddy and Austin. She'd been across the dusty dirt street, coming home from high school. Only the night before, parked in Buddy Heron's lowered Chevy pickup, she'd let Buddy slip her bra up over her breasts, let him unbotton her blouse, then let him do anything he wanted, so long as he didn't go up under her skirt. It had been the first time she'd ever felt a man's flesh touch hers, the first time she'd ever felt herself go wet between the legs—the first time she'd ever held a man close, felt his whole body tremble, heard him gasp and pant, like animals do. And all because of her, because of her woman's body—her own special woman's body, hers alone.

All that day, the memory of the night before had warmed her, made her aware of herself, aware of the warmth of balm and power, of the languorous sense of infinite possibilities, aware of the time just ahead, exploring, sharing, sensing.

So, when she'd first seen Austin, she'd been thinking as a woman thinks about a man—a grown woman, inviting a grown man to look her over, see what he thought. A tilt of the hip, a lilt of the eye, and, yes, she could see that he'd noticed her—as a man notices a woman.

And her daddy had noticed, too.

From the first, her daddy had seen it, seen the two of them, how they looked at each other, the questions they asked with their eyes.

The questions—and the answers. And later the promises. Her daddy had seen them all. And her daddy could be mean. Dangerous, even, if he ever stepped over the line he'd drawn for himself, had always drawn for himself, struggling so long and so hard with himself, to keep his natural impulses so tightly in hand.

The next afternoon, after school—and after she'd made sure that her daddy was meeting with the ladies aid society—she'd put on her white eyelet dress, and tied a ribbon in her hair, and put on her white shoes. The walk into town was a little less than a mile,

and the weather had been warm. She'd walked slowly, so as not to sweat. And she'd remembered to take some toilet paper, to wipe off the white shoes after walking down the dirt road.

She'd known he would be staying at the Manor House. There was only the Hotel Grand besides the Manor House, and she'd known that he wouldn't stay at the Grand, not with his beautiful clothes, and his manners, and his full, rich voice.

She'd walked past the hotel, just strolling along, and there he was, on the verandah that ran the full length of the Manor House. He'd been sitting in a rocker, fanning himself with a palmetto fan, like everyone else. It hadn't even been necessary to catch his eye. Because, right away, he'd recognized her. He'd put aside his fan, and come down off the verandah, and greeted her with a little bow, taking off his Panama hat to her, doing it with a wide, rakish flourish.

From that moment, that very moment, standing with the sun in her eyes, shading her eyes with her hand, dressed in her white eyelet dress, smiling up full into his face, she'd felt herself change. From that moment on, she'd known that her life would be different.

"Love at first sight," that's how she'd thought of it. For years, that's how she'd thought of it. For years, she'd believed that she'd lived an enchanted life, a princess in a castle, dressed in her gowns, awaiting the return of her master. Even the memory of her father's death, the terrible suspicion, hadn't troubled those constant daydreams, those nights of fantasy. Because she had Austin Holloway. And Austin Holloway was a man like no other, a man with a vision, a man who dwelt among the gods, listening to other voices, seeing other visions.

But when he came to her in the night, and pressed himself upon her, and demanded entrace to her body with the same frenzy of passion with which he could turn on the crowds that came to hear him preach, he was nothing more than a man—a man like other men, a man with the blind, urgent need to thrust his flesh into her flesh.

Her man.

From that night on, that first night, at the Manor Hotel, her man.

When he'd finally fallen back away from her, exausted, making small sounds in his throat, with the warm rush of him inside her, still a part of her flesh, she'd felt closer to God than ever before.

And closer to the Devil, too.

Because Austin knew the Devil as well as he knew God.

Sometimes she thought that God and the Devil worked together. God enticed, the Devil enslaved.

Because, surely, the Devil had enslaved her.

At first, she'd thought the secret she knew would keep her free, liberate her from the Devil, the tyrant with Austin's face, sometimes the saint, more often the sinner.

It was the sinner that came in the night, to savage her flesh. The saint materialized in the light of day, sometimes smiling, sometimes ranting, but always sitting in judgment: accusing, absolving, raving, sometimes mewling.

Only the babies had saved her.

The live babies, Gloria and Elton.

Not the dead baby, the lump of flesh she'd never seen.

Only when her babies were born had she ever been free from him. Yet, even then, she'd realized that she'd never be really free, didn't want to be free, not really.

When she began to show, the times between his nighttime visits began to lengthen out, then cease altogether. Once, timidly, she said that sometimes she waited for him, listened for the sound of his hand on her doorknob. He'd looked at her the way he looked down on the sinners, then turned away.

Now, I wear my apron high . . .

You see my door and pass it by . . .

It was a song from the hills, the same hills her daddy had come from. And it was true. From the time she began to show with Gloria, Austin had changed toward her. Sometimes it saddened her—until Gloria was born. Then she rejoiced.

Because, yes, they'd set her free—first Gloria, then Elton, five years apart.

Gloria had been a love child. Elton had been nobody's child, the child she'd had to have, after the one born dead.

Poor Elton.

Poor, pale, timid Elton.

Angry Elton.

With her feet on the floor beside the chaise, with her hands on either side, braced, she pushed herself carefully to her feet. She must see Elton. During his whole life, he'd been troubled. But now, today, tonight, with the strangers in the hallways, Elton would be especially anxious, timid within himself, yet angrily peering out at them as his monster began to stir.

For a long time now, the strangers had been calling: silent men with hostile eyes, asking their angry questions. Only Austin had saved him: she knew that, admitted that. Austin had them all fooled: the police, the probation officers, the judges, everyone. Effortlessly, Austin turned black into white, lies into truth—evil into good.

She walked to the bar, looked at herself in the mirror. Timidly, she smiled at her reflection: the heart-shaped face that he'd always loved so dearly, the small mouth with cherub lips, the wide, innocent eyes. Marvella Holloway. Beloved by millions—so long as she never spoke.

She turned away, walked to the door, went out into the hallway. A late-night stillness had settled on the hallway. The two guards, nodding politely, were heavy-eyed, waiting for their relief. She counted the doors: three doors, between her room and Elton's. At the fourth door, 1106, she softly knocked. No answer, as she expected. She knocked again, then turned the knob. Yes, he'd left the door unlocked for her.

As he always did, Elton had insisted on a small single room, not a suite. Softly, she opened the door, stepped inside. Light came only from a single bedside lamp. Elton stood beside the bureau. One of the bureau's drawers was open. Facing her, Elton held a length of thick cord in his hands. Watching her with his expressionless eyes, he raised his hands with the cord dangling between them, as if he were making her an offering. Then he turned, moved his hands over the open drawer, released the cord,

let it fall into the drawer. Slowly, ceremoniously, he slid the drawer closed, then turned again to face her.

"It's late," he said. "Too late for you to be here. Or for me to be here, either. You should be in bed, Mother. And I should be out."

"Elton—" Hesitantly, she stepped closer. "I'm afraid. These men, these strangers. They frighten me." She shook her head, then sank into an armchair. "This city frightens me, too. They don't believe in us, these people. I can feel it, that they don't believe in us."

"Not us, Mother. Him. They don't believe in him. It's not us they care about. We're just faces on a TV screen, voices on the soundtrack. It's him. Always."

"Elton, you should leave. And Gloria, she should leave, too. When her husband went she should've gone, too. Gary wanted her to go. He begged her to go. I told her, too, told her she should go. And she knew I was right. I could see that she knew."

"Gloria stays because of the money, Mother. You know that. Father hired Gary to do PR, and paid him four times what he was worth, just so he could keep Gloria and the kids. Gary got out. But Gloria decided to take the cars, and the house, and the stocks and bonds. She decided to stay."

"Then you leave, Elton. Gloria doesn't have to leave. But you do. You *have* to leave. Now. Right now. Tonight. I can feel it, that you have to leave. Right now."

"What would I do if I left? Have you ever asked yourself? You can see the problems, Mother. But you can't see the cures."

Slowly she shook her head. "Cures? Are there any cures?"

"There would've been a cure for Gloria. Gary loved her. He still loves he, wants her. But she turned her back on him. So now she's lost." He let a moment of silence pass. Then: "She's lost, because she stayed. But I'd be lost if I left."

"Maybe—" Timidly, tremulously, she hesitated. "Maybe I could leave with you, Elton. Could we do that? Leave together, the two of us?"

"No, we couldn't do that, Mother."

"Why?"

"Because it's too late for you, Mother. There's no place you

can imagine that you'd rather be—nothing you'd rather do." He let another moment pass, then said, "You're protected, Mother. You're cared for, whether you realize it or not. You drink, and you're protected. It's all you can ask for. Because you can't be alone when you drink."

"Elton, I—"

"And I'm protected, too, you see."

"Elton, no. You're not protected. I see these men, I hear people talking. Their faces—I see what they're thinking, in their faces. Don't you understand that?"

"Whose faces? Who're you talking about?"

"The strangers. They're your enemies, Elton. You don't see it. But I do. And Gloria does, too. And Herbert—and Lloyd. They all know, Elton. And it's dangerous, what they know."

"All except Father. He doesn't know."

"I—" She shook her head. "I haven't—" Still shaking her head, she discovered that she couldn't answer. There were no words, suddenly no words. Nothing was left.

"You haven't seen him, then. You haven't seen Father."

"No."

"Well, I've seen him. And I can tell you, I'm safe. I'm protected, Mother."

"Protected from what?"

"I can't tell you that, Mother. You have your secrets, and I have mine. And it's better not to ask about secrets."

"You have secrets, Elton. But I don't." She paused, then said, "Except for one, just one secret. A very old secret."

"It's about Father, isn't it?"

"H-how'd you know?"

"Because you don't have a life of your own, Mother. So it's got to be about Father."

"Shall I tell you, Elton? About the secret? It might help you if you knew. It might give you power. Secret power."

He shook his head. "No, don't tell me. Because then it wouldn't be your secret anymore. It'd be our secret. And I don't want any more secrets. They can be dangerous, you know. Secrets can hurt. Kill, even."

She frowned, focused on him. "Kill? Did you say kill?" As she said it, spoke the single word, she saw him again, the dead boy, lying beside the twisted bicycle. Susan Gaines's mother had died that day. So Susan had left her alone. She'd gone into Austin's room, and found some money, more than a hundred dollars. She'd taken the money, and she'd found keys to the Cadillac. Even though it had been summer, hot and smoggy in Los Angeles, she'd thrown a coat over her dressing gown. She'd gone to the garage, and started the Cadillac, and backed it out of the garage. She'd been within a block of the supermarket, calculating how many bottles of vodka she could buy for a hundred dollars, when she'd felt the thud, felt the car swerve.

She'd felt the thud, and she'd heard the boy's scream.

His screams and her screams, echoing and reechoing . . .

The same screams she'd heard when she'd found her father, dead. Always, the two screams ran together, echoing and re echoing.

Always. Always.

"Kill?" she repeated.

He didn't reply; he only nodded, very slowly.

18

Over his newspaper, Canelli saw Elton Holloway leaving the elevator. Automatically, he checked the time: 9:10 A.M. Without doubt, the suspect was going for breakfast. Noisily, Canelli folded his newspaper, then rose abruptly to his feet. Last night, and again this morning, the lieutenants had ordered that surveillance be tightened so that, if he looked, the suspect would know he was being followed. After thinking about it, Canelli had approved. If Elton Holloway was a loonie, a compulsive killer, then anything that would keep him from killing might make him all the more determined to find a victim, kill again.

Yesterday—Wednesday—the suspect had reportedly eaten breakfast inside the hotel. But today, he was crossing the lobby toward the Powell Street entrance. Canelli let him pass, slipped a transparent earpiece into his ear, pressed a switch set into the handle of the tiny surveillance microphone concealed in his palm:

"This is Canelli. He's going out to Powell Street. I've got him." He waited for acknowledgment, frowned, repeated the transmission. Nothing. Once again, the equipment had failed. Muttering an obscenity, he switched off the radio and fell in behind the suspect. Outside, the September morning was warm and calm. Overhead, the sky was a deep, clear blue. On Powell Street, a passing cable car was filled with beaming passengers, most of them with cameras slung around their necks. To himself, Canelli smiled. He'd been born in San Francisco, had lived here all his life. But, still, the city excited him, pleased him. When he got married, he would live in the Sunset District, where he was

born, and where his parents lived. Some criticized the monotony of the Sunset's stucco row houses, some even called them ugly. Canelli didn't agree. "Home is where the heart is," someone had said. And his heart was in the Sunset.

Hands in his pockets, whistling, Canelli walked a little faster, slightly closing the distance between himself and the young man with the pale face and blank eyes who was suspected of at least a dozen murders.

As Gloria pressed the buzzer, she glanced at her watch. Good, not yet nine-thirty. There was still plenty of time.

The door opened to reveal Lloyd Mitchell. Seeing him with his hair rumpled, beard-stubbled, wearing a tee shirt, Gloria privately smiled. Mitchell had worked for her father before she was born. But she'd never before seen him without a shirt and tie, wearing his standard blue suit. Even when he'd played with them, during her childhood, he'd always worn a tie.

"Sorry to bother you," she said. "But I'm locked out. You've got a passkey, haven't you?"

He frowned. "These doors, they aren't spring locks. How could you—?"

"The lock's screwed up." She edged her voice with authority. "Give it to me. Dad needs some stuff, some research."

For a moment, stubbornly, plainly suspicious, the big man remained motionless, looking at her with his dark, still eyes. The message: Mitchell answered only to Austin Holloway, took orders only from Holloway.

"Lloyd—*pu-leeze*." This time, she smiled. "I'll bring it right back. I promise."

Finally he shrugged, reached in his pocket, produced the key, reluctantly handed it over. She thanked him brightly, patted him on his thick, hairy forearm, and moved briskly away in the direction of her room, around the corner, out of sight.

If he'd been dressed in his blue suit and tie, he might have insisted on coming with her. He would have insisted on testing her door, double-checking. Mitchell's suspicions were eternal.

At the corner of the corridor she turned, looked back, made

sure his door was closed. Only one of the two guards were in sight, turned away from her. Quickly, she moved to Elton's door, opened it, stepped inside, shot the bolt. Slipping the key into the pocket of her slacks, she stood motionless for a moment, looking around the room. Elton's suitcases were still on the floor beside the bureau. Sometimes, on the road, Elton lived out of his suitcases, never allowing anyone to help him unpack. Indecisively, she eyed the two suitcases, then moved to the bureau. The top two drawers were empty. The second drawer was filled with shirts, underwear, and socks. Gingerly, she stirred at the underwear—

—and found it: a three-foot length of thick golden cord, knotted at either end. It was heavily plaited, the kind of decorative cord that might have been used to tie back old-fashioned velvet draperies.

Aware of the sudden thumping of her heart, she stood motionless for a moment, suddenly terrified, helplessly holding the cord draped over both her hands. Her breath was coming harshly, blocked in her throat. If he should come back, find her—

As if the cord had come alive, she panicked and dropped it. She turned to the door, hesitated, turned back to face the bureau. Had the drawer been open? Closed?

Should she take the cord? Leave it?

This was proof—the proof that Elton was a murderer. With this much proof, the police would impound Elton's possessions, take his fingerprints.

Who would she help, if she took the cord? Who would she hurt?

She couldn't decide. Couldn't think. Couldn't move.

But she must *move*. Must think.

As she picked up the cord, she saw her fingers trembling. Never could she remember seeing her fingers tremble like this.

Never.

19

"We can't tell him now," Flournoy insisted. "This meeting tonight, this banquet—you're probably not aware of it, Gloria, but tonight, this speech, how it's received, it's the most important point in Austin's career, no question."

"He wants to be president," she said. "That's what you mean."

"No," Flournoy answered primly. Mouth drawn into a disapproving line, nostrils pinched, he repeated it: "No, not at all. And I wish you wouldn't—"

"He wants to choose a president, then. What the hell's the difference? The point is, the more important he becomes, the more a scandal can hurt him. Don't you see that, for God's sake? *Don't* you?"

"After the meeting I'll talk to him. I promise. I'll—"

"No. After the meeting, *we'll* talk to him, Herbert. And meanwhile—" She raised the golden cord, made Flournoy look at it. "Meanwhile, I want to show this to Mitchell. Now. Right now. You can sit in or not, I don't care. But I'm—"

"Gloria, you—you're out of your depth on this. Remember, the police have already talked to him, and apparently didn't get anything incriminating. And we've got Wertheimer, too. So we can afford to step back, give ourselves time to—"

"No, Herbert, *you're* out of your depth. You won't acknowledge anything that could rock the boat, put a wrinkle in my father's expensive psyche. And that's just plain, goddamn shortsighted. And it's stupid, too. Because we can do something, now.

As long as Elton's free, we've got room to maneuver. But time's running out. Don't you *see* that?"

"I'm not disagreeing with you, Gloria. I'm just saying that—"

She turned away from him. Dangling the golden cord from one hand, she strode to the telephone, punched out Mitchell's room number.

"Lloyd, I'm in Herbert's room. We have to talk to you. Right now." She paused, listened a moment, then said, "Assign someone else. This is important." She listened, nodded, replaced the phone in its cradle.

She dropped the coil of golden cord across Mitchell's thigh, dropped the passkey in his lap. She watched him look down at the key and the cord. Plainly, he realized what the two together meant.

"I found it in Elton's room," she said. "That girl, the prostitute, was killed with a cord like this. I don't know whether the police can match up the cord with marks on the girl's throat. But I'm betting they can."

Still with his head lowered, Mitchell stared down at the key and the cord. Then, gravely, he took the key, slipped it into his pocket. Finally, as if its touch might contaminate, he gingerly touched the cord, running his large, blunt fingers lightly along the silken braids. Gloria glanced meaningfully at Flournoy, then returned her gaze to Mitchell. For now, silence was her best strategy. Whatever Mitchell decided, the decision would be his alone. Because he coveted nothing, therefore depended on Austin Holloway for nothing, Mitchell's influence on her father was unquestioned. Making the decisions that really mattered, her father always listened last to Mitchell. Looking down at his big, rough-cut head with its thick, close-cropped hair, she imagined him a Roman centurion, preparing himself for battle. In her imagination, he wore sword-scarred armor, not an off-the-rack blue suit.

Finally Mitchell raised his head. "You talked to them, the detectives. Do you think they'll arrest him?"

"I think if they had this—" She pointed to the cord. " —they'd arrest him. Yes."

"There's probably other evidence," Flournoy said. "It's only logical." He spoke heavily, tonelessly. "Otherwise, they wouldn't have come here." His narrow, aesthetic face was drawn, his lips were compressed. Behind sparkling gold-rimmed designer glasses, his eyes were dull, smudged by fatigue.

"Then we've got to talk to Austin," Mitchell said. "Now. Today. He's got to get Elton out of town, out of the country. It'll ruin Austin, ruin The Hour, if they ever arrest Elton."

Gloria drew a deep, grateful breath. The only person Austin Holloway trusted completely had finally faced the inevitable.

For a moment they sat silently, each avoiding the others' eyes. Finally Flournoy, too, drew a deep breath. "After the banquet tonight, though. We'll tell him afterward. Not before. We'll all three talk to him."

Gloria turned to Mitchell. "Tonight you're going to have to watch Elton. We can't keep him from leaving the hotel, I guess. Not physically. But if he goes out, you've got to follow him, make sure he doesn't—" She broke off, shook her head, fell into an incredulous silence. Having forced the others to accept the fact that her brother was a murderer, she realized that she could hardly comprehend it herself.

"I should be at the banquet, though," Mitchell said. "With Austin."

"Elton's got to be watched," Flournoy said. "Right now, that's more important than anything else. If he should—"

Grimly, she finished it for him: "If he should try it again, and they arrest him, then—" Once more, she let it go ominously unfinished.

"It's also possible," Flournoy said, "that if the police get him outside his room, outside the hotel, they could question him, get him to talk. He could leave the hotel and never come back."

As the significance of the words registered, each of them fell separately silent, avoiding one another's eyes. Then Mitchell said, "I'll have him watched during the day. And tonight, I'll do

it myself if he goes out." He rose, took the passkey from his pocket, held it out to Gloria, with the golden cord.

"You'd better put this back. I don't think he should know we've got it. I'll wait in the hallway while you put it back, to make sure he doesn't see you."

Nodding, she took the cord and the key. For a moment they stood facing each other. When he spoke, Mitchell's voice was low, thick with emotion: "He was always different—always so frail, so unhappy. Nobody would play with him, I remember. Not even you."

Slowly, with infinite regret, she nodded. "Not even me."

20

With the tip of his right forefinger Holloway touched the tiny knot of skin at the corner of his mouth.

"It shouldn't be a problem," the doctor had said. "Not unless it gets larger. We'll keep an eye on it."

He leaned close to the bathroom mirror, examined the spot. At its center, the spot had reddened. When he returned to Los Angeles, he would call the doctor, tell him about the red spot. Of course, the doctor would want him to come into the office. A half day wasted. A half day, and a hundred dollars for the visit.

Someone had once said that the medical profession was America's priesthood. And it was true. No matter how much money his doctor made, Holloway's income would always be many times more. Yet, when he needed medical advice, he must journey to the doctor, hat in hand, sometimes with his heart in his mouth, seeking solace. Once, after his "cardiac event," he'd considered adding a doctor to his staff. But then he'd realized that only a second-rater would take such a job, never mind the salary.

He stepped back from the mirror, lifted his chin, critically examined himself. Yes, for the job ahead, he'd chosen wisely: pinstriped blue suit, vest, gleaming white shirt, conservative tie, French cuffs. On Sunday, for the cameras, for the eager masses, he would wear polyester. But for tonight, only Brooks Brothers would do.

He glanced at his watch. Ten more minutes, and Flournoy would knock on his door. This was the time he needed most, this time alone, in absolute solitude, all calls held, his thoughts

focused on the task ahead. Years ago, when he'd first begun, he'd practiced in front of the mirror, looking himself squarely in the eye, gesturing, exhorting, pleading—praying for the sinners.

What was it about bathrooms that made a man so thoughtful, so reflective? Was it the mirror, bringing the man face-to-face with himself? Was it the privacy, with the whole world locked out? An English king had once said that the bath was the only place a king could truly commune with himself. And then there were the elementary functions that man performed in the bathroom: the essential pleasure of a good, full bowel movement, everything in its approved shape, and consistency, accomplished without strain, without pain. And pissing, too, was an elemental pleasure, since the sexual organ was, after all, the means to the end.

Women, he'd heard, were more preoccupied with the various ceremonies and celebrations of the bath than men, perhaps because, after all, the female's role required that she adorn herself so that she could attract the male. And it was in the bath that the paints and powders and lacquers and scents were applied, all calculated to please her mate, therefore arouse him.

Or perhaps the female was more intimately involved with her organs of elimination, therefore of reproduction, since she carried everything inside, enclosed within herself.

The male was the sower of the seed, the female the receptacle.

The sower of the seed . . .

It would be the perfect lead-in to a sermon. Not, of course, as a sexual reference. Never that.

Or—yes—the face in the mirror, another lead-in. The man facing himself, facing the truth.

Anything—everything—could serve. Sometimes as he lay awake at night, amusing himself, he would take the most improbable subjects, working them into something interesting enough to keep the customers in their seats until the collection plate came around.

How often had he heard his father say it: "Keep them in their seats until the collection basket comes around."

And he'd been the one, he and his sister, who'd passed the

baskets. "Little Austin and Little Dora," his father would intone, beaming down at them, then beaming out over the congregation: women in cotton dresses, men in suspenders with their hair slicked down. Rubes. Dull, stupid rubes, sitting on benches beneath a tent that didn't shed water and wasn't paid for, listening to his father with their mouths hanging open.

"Little Austin and Little Dora . . ." God, how he'd hated the sound of those words. And his father, he'd hated his father, too. No, not hated, that wasn't the word. And not contempt, either, not really. Embarrassment. Pity, perhaps. Those were the words. It wasn't what his father did, but instead what he didn't do—could have done, but didn't do. Even as a child, a small child, sitting on a camp chair beside the pulpit, listening to his father preach, he'd sensed the futility, the waste. He could see it in the faces: the hunger, the urge to be led, the half-awakened desire to believe. They were like half-opened flowers—like, yes, lambs, ready for the slaughter. Ready, and willing.

But his father was too timid to wield the knife. His father was a pale, worried man, a soft-spoken man, a small-minded man. Where others led, he followed; when others demanded, his father begged.

Every Sunday afternoon, he would watch them: his father and his mother at the round oak dining room table, counting the collection money. First they'd begin with the bills: the dollar bills, and, a miracle, the occasional five, all of them neatly stacked. Then the half dollars and the quarters, and the dimes and the nickels and the pennies, too, all stacked. After the count had been made, and the results noted in a bound notebook, his father would shake his head.

Only once had he really respected his father. He'd been eleven years old. For weeks, every Sunday, he'd taken a fifty-cent piece from the collection basket. He could still vividly remember the incredibly sweet taste of that forbidden fruit, the first time he'd slipped the half dollar in his pocket. Never before, never since, had he felt so breathlessly alive. Every sensation, every emotion, had been almost unbearably heightened: the shirt, soaked with sudden sweat, the stomach, abjectly quivering—the weight of the

silver half dollar in his pocket, sin incarnate. Immediately, he'd wanted to put it back, rid himself of the tangible proof that he'd stolen money meant for the church. But the risk of returning it to the basket would be more than the risk of stealing it.

Sunday after Sunday, legs shaking, carrying the collection basket with fifty cents missing, he'd walked up the aisle toward the pulpit, where his father stood smiling down on him, waiting to bless the offering. In the background, his mother played softly on their battered piano, the piano that had only brought twenty dollars at auction after his father's death.

After five weeks—two dollars and fifty cents—he'd come home from school to find his parents waiting for him, sitting like Herod's judges in the living room, side by side in high-backed chairs. The five half dollars that he'd hidden in the toe of a bedroom slipper had been stacked neatly on the coffee table. His parents looked at him with long, mournful faces. It was the first time he'd realized how similar his parents looked.

At first his father had prayed over him—while his mother had cried, and his sister had looked on with saucer eyes. Then, towering over him, his father asked him whether he repented, whether he realized the magnitude of his sin, stealing God's money. Dry eyed, fists clenched at his sides, he'd first denied that he'd stolen the money. But, even as he said it, he could hear the tremor of guilt in his own voice, feel the fear of discovery flickering in his eyes. And he'd realized, too, that his denials only infuriated his father. So, hotly, he'd denied that it was God's money that he'd taken. "If we buy things with it, things we use, then how can it be God's money?" he'd asked. For a moment, taken aback, his father had been unable to speak. Then, sputtering, he'd said that he did God's work.

"You're no good at it," he'd shouted. "You're a terrible preacher."

Instantly, his father had struck him: a numbing blow along the side of his head.

It had been the only time he'd ever felt respect for his father—the first moment, and the last moment. Because, immediately, his

father had fallen to his knees, asking heavenly forgiveness for the sin he'd committed.

The blow had set his ears ringing. That night, his ear began to ache, and the pain was worse next day. Dr. Wyble was called, and an examination revealed that his eardrum was broken.

It was then that he'd learned the incredible power of guilt. He'd learned in an instant. And he'd never forgotten.

When he'd been fifteen years old, and his father had been fifty-five, his father had suffered his first stroke. The year had been 1937, still hard times. There'd been three hundred dollars in the bank account, and more than a thousand dollars in debts. Dr. Wyble had taken him aside and told him it would be months—years, maybe—before his father could preach again. He'd been aware of the small pang he'd experienced, unable to feel any remorse, any sadness. Then Dr. Wyble asked the question that had changed his life.

"I was in Memphis last year," the doctor had said, "and I heard Jimmy Smith speak. He's about your age, and he's been preaching for a long time now. The people seem to love him. Why couldn't you do the same?" The doctor had paused, looked at him meaningfully, then said, "There'll be bills, you know, with your father sick. Doctor bills, among others."

Clutched by the same wild, furtive contradictions of excitement and terror that he'd felt when he'd stolen his first half dollar from the collection basket, he'd done it, taken the pulpit, on the first Sunday following his father's stroke. The word had gotten around town that he'd be preaching, and out of sympathy the congregation had been much larger than usual. When he'd stepped through the canvas flap and seen them, all eyes turned to him, he'd momentarily been stunned, incapable of movement, much less speech. But somehow, he'd made his way to the pulpit, which had been cut down for him the day before. His mother had coached him, but the sight of the congregation had driven her words from his thoughts. Yet, somehow, he was speaking. And, incredibly, he began to feel the response, that magical connection between the speaker and his audience that, on the rise, bore him miraculously on its crest, the miracle that still sustained him.

At age fifteen, clutching his father's pulpit with both hands, raising his voice to the heavens, he'd glimpsed the first and only miracle he'd ever witnessed: the power that one man could wield over the multitude of his inferiors.

An hour later, with his shirt as soaked as it had been that first time he'd taken a half dollar, with the sound of voices raised to praise him, he'd stepped down from the dais, triumphant. The promised land had opened before him. From that moment on, he'd—

From the sitting room he heard the door buzzer sound, two quick rings. Flournoy had come for him. As it had happened those many years ago, the boy triumphant over the hometown rubes, witnessing the miracle of eyes fervently kindled by words only he could speak, so would it happen tonight, the man beginning his ultimate mission.

21

". . . give you Mr. Austin Holloway, one of America's foremost citizens." Smiling, genially clapping, Clayton Brand turned to face Holloway, who rose to his feet, smiling, shaking hands with the movie star. It was a hearty, man-to-man handshake, perfectly staged.

"Thank you, Clay. And congratulations." Holloway held the handclasp as both men turned slightly toward the pool photographer, discreetly crouched in front of the head table. "I understand the new box office ratings are out. And you're still number one."

Brand's famous smile widened. "A testimony to the power of prayer, Austin. Prayer, and an inspired publicity department at the studio."

Along with the fifty-odd others in the room, the two men shared a warm, companionable laugh. They held the handclasp for another quick sequence of pictures, then Brand nodded, stepped back, kept the smile in place as he resumed his toastmaster's seat. As Holloway turned to face his audience, Flournoy caught the photographer's eye, signaled subtle dismissal. The message: no outsiders would bear witness to this meeting.

Waiting for the applause to diminish, Holloway beamed as he swept the audience with a practiced eye: the public figure, long accustomed to the plaudits of his peers. His manner was affable, projecting quiet confidence, easy authority. Like the central-casting perfection of Clayton Brand's face, Holloway's features

perfectly suited his image. His thick, graying hair was dramatically styled, his forehead was broad, his jawline was decisive, his nose patrician, his mouth expressive. As he looked out over the audience, the easy conviviality in his fine blue eyes slowly sobered as the applause ended. But the eyes were still warm, the mouth still generously upcurved as he began to speak:

"I must admit," he said, "to a sense of gratification as I look out at this assemblage of faces—all male faces." He waited for a small, appreciative ripple of laughter. "I'll deny I ever said it, of course, but the truth is, when matters of real significance are discussed—when the big decisions are made—it always turns out to be an all-male gathering. Entirely men, and entirely off the record."

He paused again, nourishing the diminishing chuckles. Then: "As you've probably noticed—" Smiling, he swept the entire room with a broad gesture."—there're no outsiders present, not even any waiters. However, before they were dismissed, they left each table amptly supplied with enough champagne, certainly, to see us through what will, I devoutly hope and believe, be a most significant time for all of us."

Once more he swept the room with the Holloway smile, once more he waited, this time for the predictable murmurs of assent and approval as he saw several in the audience good-naturedly pouring generous portions of champagne.

So far, so good.

Now, slowly, he allowed the genial smile to fade. The squared-off chin rose slightly; the voice lowered to a more somber note.

"I deeply appreciate the effort you've all made to be with us tonight. I know how busy you all are. I fully realize that if this assemblage, this distinguished gathering, were ever to magically stumble into one of those science fiction time warps for a week or so, why, this country would suddenly be operating at half speed—or less."

Another smile, another genial sweep of the audience with the grin-crinkled blue eyes. Then, visibly signaling that the amenities had been concluded, Holloway's face settled into a solemn cast as the timber of his voice deepened.

"I've invited you all here tonight because, quite simply, I'm frightened. And when a man's frightened, he does well to confess his misgivings and seek guidance from those he likes and respects. And that's what I'm doing here tonight. That's why I feel I must share with you my feelings—and my misgivings." He let a masterfully timed moment pass while he made compelling eye contact with the man farthest from the lectern: Ralph Hager, president of Grayson Industries. For the rest of the sermon, Hager would be his focus.

"I'm scared," he said, "because I find it increasingly more difficult to recognize the America that I once knew, the America that I still love. Perhaps it's advancing age; I suspect that might be part of it. I, like most of you, grew up in a simpler time, a time when people seemed to work harder than they do now. They worked harder, and they prayed harder, too. And I think—I deeply believe—that they were better for it, the people of our parents' generation. I think life meant more to them. Because they had to work for what they got, they valued it more. And on Sunday, they went to church, and they thanked God for the bounty of the week just passed." As he said it, he lifted his eyes midway to the ceiling, allowing his gaze to soften reflectively.

"My father made his ministry among those simple, hard-working people. He understood them, because he was one of them. He preached beneath the patched canvas of a revivalist's tent. In his closet there hung one suit, which my mother was hard pressed to keep clean and properly mended. We ate vegetables from the garden my mother tended. And when our roof leaked, which it most certainly did, my father fixed it with his own hands. Unless—" A smile. "—unless he was lucky enough to shame one of his more agile parishioners into doing the job."

Pensively smiling, he waited for the laugh, then quickly became serious.

"It's been almost fifty years since my father preached his last sermon. Like many of you men, rising from humble beginnings, I'm proud to say that, in my own way, I've made my mark in the world during those fifty years. My father, I believe, would be proud of me. He would also be amazed if he could see how the

miracle of modern electronics allows me to reach many times more people on a single Sunday than he reached in a lifetime of working for Christ.

"I often think about the way this country has changed during those fifty years. I often think about how the world has changed, too. Much of what I see disturbs me profoundly. So I often wonder what I can do. I wonder how I can help. I wonder how I can strengthen the forces I believe in—and I wonder how I can fight the forces that are bent on destroying this great country." He paused, gripped the lectern more firmly. The blue eyes were sharp-focused now, the voice was stern.

"Fifty years—from the thirties to the eighties. What has happened, what changes have been wrought across the face of the world during those fifty years? Each of you would, I'm sure, answer that question differently. But all of you, I think, would agree on one essential premise—" He allowed a long, compelling moment to pass as he swept the audience with eyes that had come alive, flashing an orator's challenge. "You will agree that during those fifty years, the forces of godlessness, of the Antichrist, have grown steadily stronger. Until, today, the United States stands virtually alone, surrounded by a host of mortal enemies. From beyond our shores, we are besieged by an unholy alliance of Muslim fanatics and atheistic Communists. From within, our society is being ravaged by drugs. Promiscuousness and perversion are corrupting our youth. Behind the shameful guise of political equality, liberal materialists are attacking the foundations of our society, shackling our God-given freedoms, questioning the very Bible that is the bedrock of Christianity."

He paused, sipped from a water goblet, measured the audience with a covertly calculating glance. He'd gotten their attention, but he hadn't aroused them. He'd expected it, of course, expected this initial resistance. By definition, this was the toughest audience he'd ever faced—the richest, the most powerful, therefore the toughest. "For nothing you get nothing," his father said so often, one of his most serviceable bromides. Over the rim of his goblet, Holloway glanced at Flournoy. The general

manager was watching him with noncommittal eyes, Flournoy's habitual I-told-you-so expression.

Always, the pessimists of the world would wait for the adventurous among them to falter, finally fall. The bold died in battle, clucked over by the pessimists—and buried by them, too.

Holloway placed the goblet on the table, drew a deep breath, and began again. He spoke deliberately, returning to the low, rich end of the register.

"I could expand on the dimensions of the peril that surrounds us. Looking abroad, I could quote casualty rates from the far-flung fronts, where we are battling the Communists. At home, I could remind you of the shameful barricades that we have been compelled to erect around the White House as we guard against the deranged suicide bombers who would gladly die for Islam. I could remind you of the laws that our congressmen have enacted that allow unborn babies to be murdered. Others in Washington have tried to take our weapons from us—while criminals can buy guns on any street corner. I could quote statistics proving that, in the United States, the illicit drug industry's gross sales exceed General Motors's. In some parts of the country, the divorce rate exceeds the marriage rate. Homosexuality flourishes—and threatens to loose upon us a plague that could rival the Black Death."

He broke off, sipped again from the glass. Yes, they were rustling, quickening, exchanging nods of approval, making small, significant noises. As the champagne continued to flow, the beast that lay waiting in the thicket of every crowd was beginning to stir. And it was with the beast that he'd come to do business.

"I could go on with this grim chronicle," he said, once more speaking slowly, in a low, compelling register. "I could add to this shameful litany of disasters past and present. But the truth is I didn't come here this evening to wring my hands. Because I don't despair. Far from it. In fact, I've come here tonight to report to you on a miracle—a God-given miracle that has been burgeoning in this country for many years, a miracle that, properly nurtured, can save us all.

"I'm talking, my friends, about the rise of religion in America." A pause, a final full, significant sweep of their attentive, upturned faces. Yes, they were with him now. The beast was finally aroused.

"I'm talking about those millions upon millions in this country who turn to their TV sets every Sunday—and who, during the week, open their hearts—and their checkbooks. And I'm here to tell you that, with the proper guidance, these millions can save us all. They are citizen soldiers, ready and willing to march under Christ's banner, ready to endure any privation, pay any price for the privilege of serving. We spoke earlier of the riches generated by the drug trade. Well, praise God, I can report to you that the contributions of these millions of the faithful rival the earnings of those who seek to destroy us with drugs.

"But, more important than debit-credit calculations, vastly more important, is the fact that these millions of fundamentalist Christians, these soldiers for Christ, are true believers. They see what needs to be done—" A short, meaningful pause. "And they're willing to do it, willing to do their duty." Another uncompromising pause, reinforced by the full force of the Holloway presence: a modern-day prophet standing magestically tall, solemnly exhorting the faithful:

"These millions constitute a vast reservoir of potential power—a vast untapped reservoir." A final pause. Then: "And that, gentlemen, is the subject I propose to discuss with you here tonight—that power, and how it can be tapped. Because I believe, I devoutly believe, that God has provided us with the means of harnessing that power and converting it to votes. And these votes, combined, could be America's salvation.

"I'm speaking, of course, about the miracle of electronics—of television, and radio, and video cassettes. And I'm telling you that we're only seeing the start of this miracle. A technological revolution is about to explode—a computer-driven communications breakthrough that will, literally, unite us all into one vast electronic family.

"And those of us that are ready will reap the rewards. We will gain control of America. We will send our message to Christ's

disenfranchised millions. We will show them the danger—and tell them how they can help. We'll show them how, united, they can transform America. And where a stronger, revitalized America leads, the free world will follow.

"A dream, you say. Oh, yes—" The handsome head gravely inclined. "Oh, yes—a dream. But I tell you, my friends, that it is a practical dream—a dream that, on election day, will be fulfilled."

He paused, glanced at Flournoy, his eternal barometer. Flournoy was nodding—incredibly, almost smiling. The contest, then, was there for the winning. It had now come time for the salesman's close, a time to come to terms with this particular audience, on their particular terms.

"As I look around the room and try to read your faces, the message I seem to see is that the rhetoric you've heard here tonight has been interesting—and the food is good and the champagne of satisfactory vintage." Briefly, engagingly, he smiled: a man-to-man, entrepreneur-to-entrepreneur smile. "But you are men who deal in specifics. In politics, of course, rhetoric is essential. But the men behind the politicians, men like you, need more. You need facts and figures. Most of you head large corporations. You deal in numbers. So, to conclude my message to you, I offer some numbers." From an inside pocket he withdrew a single 5 × 7 card. From another pocket, he withdrew a pair of tortoiseshell reading glasses.

"Many of you, I'm sure, read the recent *This Week* article on TV evangelism. And, of course, I read it, too—" He swept the audience with another man-to-man smile. "And I was gratified, naturally, to see that, in terms of viewers, I have a comfortable lead. Which I hope never changes. Leonard Bagley was next, and then George Fisher. Five of us, altogether, reaching probably sixty million people, every week. Now, that's a lot of people. And it doesn't include many millions more who watch some of my less famous colleagues. It's a lot of people—and a lot of money coming in each week, too, let's be honest. Since *This Week* is aimed at men like you, the country's business leaders, the article dealt with the millions—billions—that're involved. They

made the point that all of us, and particularly the top five evangelists, head large organizations that are very expert at generating capital flow. They were kind enough to say that my organization, particularly, could teach both the Democrats and the Republicans a little something about fund raising and computerized mailings. And I must tell you—" The easy, fraternal smile returned. "I must tell you that I concur, absolutely.

"The article went on to talk about the Christian Fellowship Network. They described how it works, how the CFN, which I head, owns two communications satellites." Still genially smiling, he waited for the spontaneous, predictable murmurs of polite surprise to subside before he mischievously added, "And those satellites, incidentally, are paid for. We've got the pink slips." Another pause for the appreciative chuckles. Then, more seriously, he said, "For those of you who haven't read the article, you'll find a copy of it in the press kit we'll take the liberty of giving you when you leave. So you'll be up-to-date. However, the news isn't in the press kit—not in profit and loss statistics, or audience growth projections. The real news is that religion in America is alive and well. More than that, religion is gathering a vast, irresistible momentum. A tidal wave is developing, my friends. It's a wave that, properly channeled, will sweep everything before it—a wave that will sweep a government out of office with an ease that future generations will regard with amazement and awe. Historians will look back on the eighties in America as the time when Christians—born-again Christians—transformed the face of this great nation forevermore.

"But without direction, without leadership, the millions of believers are nothing more than a mob, a giant without a brain. And leadership itself is ineffective without the machinery, the technology that's needed to reach out and touch each individual, each true believer.

"Well—" Holloway surveyed the faces before him, each one attentive, expectant. This was the time to wrap it all up, make the pitch, sit down, accept the applause that would most certainly reward him. The beast had been engaged and deftly tamed. This

was the time to put rhetoric aside, the time for calm, concise candor, the salesman's close.

"Well, you know where I'm going with this. I'm telling you that the second American revolution is about to begin—the revolution for Christ. I'm telling you that the Christian Fellowship Network offers the means of catalyzing that revolution. And, yes, I'm offering myself, as leader."

At the pause, precisely on cue, the applause began—and swelled—and continued to swell. Signifying that, by the simple act of clapping their hands in common, these men were uniting. They were committed. Together, they were committed.

Still standing, Holloway slowly, gravely bowed his head, humble as he accepted tribute from this audience of the elite. He waited for the applause to die, then raised his head. His smile was self-effacing, as shy as a small boy's.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you—thank you. I hope that, in the months and years to come, we'll be working closely together, exchanging ideas, marching side by side in the front ranks of Christ's invincible legions." He paused, smiled benevolently, then said, "I would like to close with a piece of news—which I offer as an article of faith, since the negotiations are still tentative, still secret. But I feel that I want to offer something that will bind us together, something tangible, a promise for the future. So, in that spirit of fellowship, I tell you now that, yes, the rumors you may have been hearing are true. The CFN is about to conclude a takeover of one of our three major networks. I'm sure you know which one, so there's no need for me to be specific. But our lawyers tell us that, within a month's time, the takeover will be concluded. And when that time comes, I'll be in touch with many of you. Because—" Benevolently, he smiled. "Because, needless to say, we'll be forming a new board of directors. And I hope that, as we look to the future together, many of you here tonight will be willing to serve."

22

The bedside lamp had a three-way bulb. He twisted the switch. The lamp was at its brightest. He twisted the switch again. Darkness engulfed him. Another click, and the lamp was soft-lit, on low. He straightened, looked carefully at all four corners of the room. Yes, the light was exactly right. It was essential that the lighting be right, neither too low nor too high. Christ had certainly known about the importance of light. And the pope, who certainly held dominion over millions of candles—the pope knew, too. And his father, who hired men who mixed lights for the cameras, producing crisscrossed stars of Bethlehem on demand, with filters, for the cameras—his father knew, too.

Like father, like son.

Or unlike, really.

Because this light was fit for the sepulcher, not for the cameras. In this light, therefore, he would be invisible to the cameras.

Therefore safe. Undiscovered, therefore safe.

So now the ceremony could begin. He could now approach the receptacle of containment and concealment, the altar disguised as a bureau. Earlier, he'd cleared off the top, which was the means of conversion. The maids, his mother, Gloria—because of the conventionally conceived clutter, consummating in conversion, none of them realized the real existence of the altar, or the receptacle beneath. They'd only seen the bureau. As planned. Precisely as planned Therefore the receptacle was still safe, still inviolate.

So he was standing before the altar, ready to accept the instrument of deliverance. But first he must gather himself, focus himself, unite himself with the eternal forcefield that would enfold him, protect him, guide him. He must stand motionless, hands at his sides, head bowed, eyes closed.

And, yes, he could feel it beginning: a small, whisper-soft stirring, the sound of eternity's breath upon him, calling him, commanding him. Now, eyes still closed, he must concentrate, must listen for the shadow of the voices--first the shadow, then the substance.

Yes, they were drawing closer. He could feel them beside him, commanding him, God's emissaries, messengers from heaven. Without them, he was helpless, a body without a soul, a husk of flesh and bone, nothing more. Because it was the consciousness that counted—first the commandment, then the consciousness.

Sometimes they didn't come. And sometimes they came, and drew closer—and then faded away. He'd never known why they deserted him, but sometimes they did. And he would be left alone, empty, helpless.

But now, tonight, the strength of their presence was strong. Even though strangers were watching, enemies, their presence was strong, guiding him, protecting him. Because, yes, with his eyes still closed, he could feel the illumination beginning, expanding his consciousness, allowing them to enter. First the celestial expansion, then the terrestrial contraction as, yes, the transformation was complete. Now, very cautiously, he could open his eyes. This, he'd learned, was the crucial part. Because if he saw them—any of them, anywhere—then failure was certain. Because if he saw them, externalized, then they could see him, internalized, and he was helpless to act.

Still with his eyes open, slowly, he pivoted, searching everywhere, every corner of the softly lit room. Yes, he was alone; the transformation was complete. One step brought him within arm's reach of the altar. The drawer was extending itself, opening. And he could see his hands, first lowering, then raising, holding the instrument of God's commandment, the sacred golden cord.

* * *

As Hastings pushed through the brass-framed revolving doors and stood surveying the now familiar main lobby of the St. Francis, he saw Canelli urgently signaling with his eyes to the elevators. Following Canelli's line of sight, Hastings saw Elton Holloway walking diagonally across the lobby, bound for the revolving doors. Nodding to Canelli, Hastings moved aside, turning his back to the suspect. The message: Hastings would join Canelli, who'd certainly alerted the other three men on duty at the hotel's other entrances, told them the suspect was on the move. But as Elton Holloway drew closer, Hastings saw Canelli's eyes move urgently in another direction. Following this second silent signal, Hastings saw Lloyd Mitchell, about twenty feet behind Elton Holloway. Obviously, Mitchell meant to follow Elton. Canelli was standing motionless, shoulders slightly raised, hands slightly spread, mutely perplexed, awaiting orders. To signal that they must follow Mitchell, at least for now, Hastings stopped, stood still, let Elton enter the revolving doors, with Mitchell closing the distance between them. Hastings let Mitchell enter the revolving doors, then stepped briskly forward, nodding for Canelli to do the same.

Mitchell stepped clear of the revolving doors, joined the pedestrian stream. The time was a little after ten o'clock, the same time Elton had gone out Tuesday night.

Was Elton carrying the gold cord, concealed?

Had it been a mistake for Gloria to replace the cord in Elton's drawer?

In the street, outside the hotel, Elton was vulnerable to arrest. If he were arrested, and the cord was found . . .

Arrested for what? For walking steadily along, eyes front, dressed like a typical tourist?

Covertly Mitchell glanced over his shoulder. Hastings and the other one—the big, good-natured Italian detective—they were following along behind. Conspicuously following, making no effort at concealment.

What were they thinking, the two homicide detectives? What was their strategy?

Ahead, at the corner of Powell and Geary, Elton was turning right. He did not glance over his shoulder, did not slacken his steady, leg-locked arm-stiffened automaton's gait. He could be a soldier on parade: an insane soldier, marching to his own destruction.

Onward Christian soldiers . . .

It was Austin's favorite hymn. At the banquet tonight, that would be Austin's theme, the recruitment of Christian soldiers, following Austin to victory over the Antichrist.

Rich, powerful Christian soldiers. Some of them fierce Christian soldiers. But even the rich ones, even the powerful ones, and the fierce ones, all of them would follow along behind Austin. Because Austin had the power. Always, ever since childhood, Austin had had the power.

For thirty-five years, they'd been together, he and Austin. So that now they shared the same thoughts, acted with the same will, the two of them. Where one man ended, the other man began. Often, poetically, Austin had put the thought into words, that they were inseparable. And the poetic words were true: quiet words, meant only for him.

Remembering the magic of the words, Mitchell realized that he was touching the butt of the .45 automatic he carried in a shoulder holster slung beneath his left arm. Twice, during those years, he'd saved Austin's life, payment in part for his own life, returned to him by Austin, so long ago.

One man, the second man, he'd killed to protect Austin from certain death.

The other man . . .

At the thought of the other man, the first man, he blinked, realized that his stride had faltered. How long had it been since he'd killed that first man? How long had it been since he allowed himself to think about it?

The second man, yes. Often, he thought of the second man. The scene of the second man's death was proudly, vividly etched

in memory, a fragment of time that had changed his life forever—his life, Austin's life, countless other lives, all in the moment it took to draw a gun and fire it. He could still hear the sound of the shot, still smell the gunpowder. And he could still hear Flournoy speaking as they stood shoulder to shoulder, staring down at the corpse of the maniac who'd come to the foot of the stage, drawn a revolver, aimed at Austin, fired a single round into the pulpit just three inches below the pulpit's walnut rim.

"You can kill," Flournoy had said. "Thank God, you can kill."

"This is really crazy," Canelli muttered, swearing fervently as he dodged a drunken man who wore a red Shriner's fez with a golden tassle. "Mitchell's following him. And we're following Mitchell."

"Mitchell's on our side," Hastings said. "Nothing's going to happen—nobody'll get killed—so long as he's there."

"But I thought we *wanted* something to happen."

"We need a warrant. And it's basically a political decision—Chief Dwyer's decision—whether we get one. If we collar Elton trying to hit another whore, it'll get the chief's attention. Otherwise, I think Dwyer would just as soon pass, let them leave town."

"It's crazy," Canelli repeated. "*Crazy.* Anybody else, with a good eyeball identification, and with what the FBI's got for background, he'd be locked up. Now. Right now. But just because he's Austin Holloway's son, he's walking around. It doesn't make any sense."

"I'm not arguing with you, Canelli. I'm just telling you how it's coming down. You want to talk to the chief, make an appointment."

"Well, I think it's crazy." Canelli considered, then said thoughtfully, "Jeez, maybe the chief's an Austin Holloway fan. Ever think of that, Lieutenant?"

"Let's get a little closer," Hastings said, picking up the pace. "And check your radio, will you?" As he spoke, he sharply

shook his head at a panhandler who wore a bedraggled cowboy hat and a greasy poncho. The two detectives were walking south on Mason Street, where the Tenderloin began—where anything was for sale. Just ahead, in the next block, Hastings saw the red neon sign identifying the Bayside Hotel. And, yes, there was Dancer Browne's Continental, parked in its accustomed spot. Now Elton Holloway was within a hundred feet of the hotel, almost directly across the street from Dancer Browne's car. A black hooker was making her approach. The suspect glanced at her once, shook his head, continued walking, eyes fixed rigidly straight ahead. He was passing in front of the hotel. Behind him, Mitchell was walking faster now, closing the distance between them.

"The radio's okay," Canelli said. Adding ruefully: "For now, anyhow, it's okay. Personally, I think the guy who buys our electronics stuff should be demoted, whoever he is. I mean, the surveillance stuff only works about half the time, it seems like."

"I think the problem's maintenance," Hastings answered. "The equipment's the best available, as far as I know."

They crossed O'Farrell Street shoulder to shoulder, dodging the slow-moving cars.

"I wonder why he isn't looking back?" Canelli said. "He must know we're here. That's the plan, according to Lieutenant Friedman. He's supposed to know we're following him. Right? We're supposed to be putting pressure on him. Right?"

Hastings nodded. "Right."

"Then why isn't he looking back?" Canelli complained.

"Because he's crazy," Hastings answered.

Once more, Mitchell glanced over his shoulder. The two policemen were closer now. And ahead, Elton was talking to another whore, this one a white woman. She was dressed head to foot in skintight black leather. Her hair was bleached white and stood out from her head. Her face was grotesquely painted, eyes shadowed an iridescent blue, mouth smeared bright red. Her smile was obscene. Allowing the sidewalk crowds to break around him, Mitchell stood motionless. A half block behind, the

two policemen were standing in front of a shop window, conspiciously staring at the display. The light from the window bathed their faces in a garish fluorescent blue. Now Elton and the woman were moving together toward Market Street, three blocks away. The woman was talking, smiling with her crimson-painted mouth, gesturing with a bracelet-bangled hand. Elton was saying nothing, walking with his empty eyes fixed straight ahead.

Was it possible that Elton didn't know they were being followed?

Was it possible that he knew—and didn't care?

Ahead, the traffic light turned green. Elton and the woman were crossing Ellis Street.

Should he make his presence known to the woman, force her away from Elton's side, force Elton to return to the St. Francis? Could he do it? Would Elton come with him? What would happen if Elton resisted? Would the police have their chance? If they found the cord on Elton, they could arrest him. And disaster would certainly follow.

As Mitchell crossed Ellis, he looked back. Yes, the policemen were coming closer. One of them—Canelli—was pressing a pudgy forefinger to a tiny earphone as he talked into the palm of his hand. His words would be relayed to the police switchboard, connecting him to the vast machinery of the law: hundreds, thousands of policemen, watching and waiting.

The image of the police switchboard tipped the precarious balance. Mitchell stepped suddenly forward, at a half trot. He'd come down to a choice of evils, with time running against him.

But, as he quickened his pace, he saw the woman's arm come up. She was pointing to a narrow door, between two shop fronts. Elton was nodding, turning to his right, pushed the door open.

Almost all the time was gone. Only minutes remained; only instinct was left.

Without looking back Mitchell broke into a full trot, reached the door: a plate glass door, inscribed THE HOTEL ALBION. He was inside a narrow, short hallway that immediately opened into a dingy, windowless lobby: four chairs, three of them empty, one occupied by a black man, asleep, snoring. A narrow stairway led

upstairs. The stairway was deserted, but Mitchell heard the sound of footsteps on bare wood: Elton and the whore, going upstairs. A big, broad-shouldered man was rising from behind a small desk. This was the inevitable bouncer, the enforcer—the man with a club, or a gun, or brass knuckles, the man with cold, killer's eyes.

As Mitchell reached for the wallet in his hip pocket, the man behind the desk moved quickly, smoothly. A blackjack materialized, slapped down on the counter, hard. But, beside the blackjack, Mitchell placed his wallet, opened.

"Can you lock that door?" Mitchell asked, jerking his head to the front hallway.

"Sure."

"Is there a back way out?"

"Sure."

"Then lock the door—for fifty dollars. Keep it locked for five minutes. Now. Before anyone comes. Fifty dollars. *Now.*" As he spoke, he moved closer to the desk, out of the line of sight from the street. Repeating urgently: "*Now.* Don't let anyone in for five minutes. And don't tell anyone about the fifty."

The bouncer's mouth warped in a mirthless smile as he pocketed the bill. He moved quickly, with surprising agility, toward the front door.

He watched her dig in the hip pocket of her black leather pants, saw her produce a key that was attached to a gold-colored medallion.

"Home sweet home." Over her shoulder she leered at him, then inserted the key in the lock. From close by, through one of the corridor's closed doors, he heard the sound of a man's voice, babbling, as if he were pretending to talk like a child. From downstairs, from the lobby, he heard the sound of violent knocking. From the stairwell, he heard the sound of footsteps.

Mitchell was coming, pursuing him. And behind Mitchell, there were the others: the policemen, and all the others. From earliest memory, he'd heard them: the furtive footfalls, followed by the faceless men.

Inside the room now, close behind her, he grasped the doorknob, closed the door. Yes, there was a bolt. He knew he was expected to set the bolt; he could feel his fingers moving in response to the command, the night's first clear command, independent of himself, of his own volition.

Because now, suddenly, it was beginning, sooner than he had first imagined. She'd already put her purse on the floor. She was sitting on the bed, tugging at one black leather boot, pulling it free. This one would take off her clothes, reveal her body to him, then ask for his money. So he must be prepared to—

From behind him came a furtive sound: a mechanical sound, metal upon metal. But he need not turn, to look. Because the power was with him now, revealing everything, concealing nothing, strengthening, steadying, commanding. Therefore, the union was complete. Volition was transferred, alignments were defined. So, protected—finally free from himself—he need only listen, sense, allow the power to flow from the cosmos to the musculature, responding, allowing his response to accelerate as he moved forward.

But now, suddenly, with only the one boot off, she was standing. She looked at the door, then looked at him. Her mouth was moving, about to protest. But, before him, the instrument of judgment had materialized: the gold coil, suspended between hands that—

"What the fuck's going—"

The wood-splintered crash was louder than the woman's voice—and louder than his voice, too, as he turned, compelled to face the familiar figure filling the doorway.

Recovering his balance, blinking in the dim light, Mitchell saw the golden cord. He lunged, caught the cord, tore it free. With his left hand, he thrust the cord into his pocket. With his right hand he drew the .45 automatic as he flung out his left arm, blocking the whore's escape from the tiny room. He saw her eyes widen, saw terror clutch at her throat, saw her mouth come open, to scream.

"Don't—" He shoved the pistol's muzzle cruelly beneath her

chin. "Don't yell. I'll pull the trigger if you yell." He held her motionless, impaled by the gun, helpless now, gone limp.

"Here—" Still with the gun jammed into her throat, he withdrew his wallet, took out two fifties. "Take these. And shut up about this. Shut up and stay here in the room. Understand?" He jabbed the gun into her flesh, felt her sag, pushed her back until, off blance, she sprawled on the bed. "Don't move. Not for five minutes." He glanced at Elton, who was standing motionless, staring at the girl on the bed as if she had just materialized. Slipping the .45 into its holster, buttoning his jacket, he stepped to the closest door, opened it, saw the toilet, the basin. Withdrawing the cord from his pocket he stepped to the toilet, dropped the cord in the water, flushed the toilet, watched the cord coil slowly, coil faster, finally disappear. Forcing himself to do it, he waited for the tank to refill, flushed the toilet again. Then he turned again to Elton, who stood as before, looking at the whore who lay sullenly on the bed, shaking her head as she muttered inaudible obscenities.

With all his strength, Hastings hammered on the steel door frame with the heel of his clench fist. Beside him, Canelli moved back, balanced himself.

"Should I kick it in, Lieutenant?"

"Without a warrant?" Furious, Hastings struck the door another blow. Then: "Get around back, in the alley. If they come out—" Futilely, he touched himself at the beltline, where a surveillance radio should be clipped. But he'd arrived at the St. Francis only moments before Elton and Mitchell had appeared: there hadn't been time to get a radio from his car, parked around the corner.

"If they come out, follow them. If they don't come out, stay there. I'll call for some back up. Try not to get too far ahead of me. Clear?"

"Yessir. Which way's the alley?"

"How the hell should I—" Through the dirty glass of the door, he saw a big man with boxer's shoulders materialize in the dim, narrow hallway that led back into the lobby. Nodding, raising a

restraining hand, the man came toward them as Hastings took his shield case from his pocket, slammed the shield against the wire-reinforced window, shouting, "Open up, goddamnit. *Now.*"

Moving deliberately, sullenly defiant, the man put his hands on the door, took off one lock, then another lock, allowed the door to swing free.

"What's the trouble, officer? What's the hurry?"

"Why's this door locked?"

The big man smiled, shrugged. "I was in the can. A place like this, you go to the can, you got to lock the door. Right?" He didn't bother to smile.

"Where's the back door? *Quick.*"

Indolently, the clerk pointed to a doorway beneath the stairs. As the two detectives split up, one racing upstairs, one struggling with the alley door, the clerk smiled, took the fifty-dollar bill from his pocket, smoothed it down against the counter, slipped it into his wallet, slipped the wallet into his pocket.

23

"I'm sorry," Flournoy said, stepping between Holloway and a bearded TV reporter. "This was a private banquet, just a dinner that Mr. Holloway has been planning for a long time, with friends." As he spoke, he nodded to the security man, who signaled for the Holloway limousine. "But if you'll be at the DeAnza Room of the St. Francis at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, we're having a buffet brunch for the press. Mr. Holloway will be there, of course, and he'll be more than happy to—"

"Excuse me—" A young woman stepped directly into his path, raising a plastic identification plaque as she said, "I'm Bea Henderson, with the *Sentinel*. I'm on the crime beat, and there've been reports that homicide detectives are—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Henderson. Mr. Holloway's late for an appointment, I'm afraid." As the limo drew to a stop at curbside, Flournoy looked at another security man, moved his head toward the woman. At the same time, the first security man opened the right rear door, ushering Holloway inside. Flournoy followed, sitting on the far side of the car so that Holloway could wave from the window. As the limousine pulled away from the curb, the pulse of the mobile phone shrilled. Flournoy glanced at Holloway, who now sat with his head resting against the seat cushions, eyes closed. As Holloway gently shook his head, eyes still closed, Flournoy lifted the phone from its cradle.

"Yes?"

"It's Lloyd, Herbert. Can you talk?"

Glancing at the security man, who sat on the jump seat, Flournoy said, "That depends on the subject."

"It's Elton. He just tried it again—tried to kill a whore, on Mason Street. Just a block from where the other one was murdered, on Tuesday."

"Where's he now?"

"In his room. With a man watching the door."

"Were there any—problems?"

"That depends on what you mean by problems. He hasn't been arrested, and the woman's all right. But she saw him with the gold cord in his hands. And, sure as hell, the police will question her."

As Flournoy listened, he kept his eyes on Holloway's face. The eyes remained closed, the facial muscles sagging. With the applause of some of the most powerful men in the country sustaining him, Holloway was recharging his batteries.

"We're coming directly to the hotel, should be there in ten minutes. Where's Gloria?"

"I don't know. As soon as I got Elton settled, I called you."

"How's his state of mind?"

"Strange. Very strange, I'd say. We've got a problem, Herbert. A big problem."

"I know. I want you to tell Gloria what's happened. Austin and I will be with you shortly."

"Right."

The connection went dead. Slowly, Flournoy replaced the phone in its cradle, glanced again at Holloway, then rested his own head on the seat cushions, allowed his eyes to close. For what lay ahead, he must prepare himself, compose himself.

As Mitchell finished speaking, Holloway sat silently on a sofa in his sitting room, head bowed, his body slack, suddenly drained. Then, with his eyes closed, very slowly, very somberly, he began to shake his head. How could it have happened? How could the evening's earlier triumph have failed him so suddenly, so completely, so catastrophically, leaving him so desolated, so vulnerable, so utterly certain that disaster threatened?

Why was he unable to open his eyes, raise his head—take command? The three of them were keeping their silence, deferring to him, waiting for him to speak. But first, before he could speak, he must purge his thoughts of all the images that had seared his consciousness as Gloria had spoken, followed by Flournoy—followed finally by Mitchell, delivering the final blow. He must somehow find peace, find release from the instant's flash of memories: the baby, feeding at Marvella's breast, the toddler, diapered, unsteadily walking across a wide green lawn—the child, singing on Sundays, and the cap-and-gowned teenager, posing with his diploma.

But the child had seldom smiled, and the teenager had never laughed. From the first, there'd been a darkness of the spirit, a sense of withdrawal. "He's like somebody else's child," Marvella had once said. "A stranger's child."

A stranger's child . . .

"Dad?" It was Gloria, speaking in a voice that was strangely soft, a voice he'd seldom heard. Slowly, with great effort, he raised his head, opened his eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He forced himself to smile. But he could feel his face—the face that was his fortune—twisting into grotesque unpredictability. Over the years, like all good actors, he'd developed a talent for imagining his face as the camera must see it. And this expression, televised, would invite disaster.

But, still, he must keep the smile in place, must make some response, any response.

"I'm as good as can be expected, I guess, considering that I've just learned that my son is a—a homicidal maniac."

As if they shared a common embarrassment, they averted their eyes as he looked at each of them in turn. He felt the bogus smile fade into final defeat as he said, "It'll take a while—a long while—to adjust to the idea, really understand. I always knew, of course, that Elton was—" Helplessly, he shook his head. "—that he was strange, that he did strange things. There were the—the juvenile authorities, and the police, a few times. But this, it—"

He realized that, still, he was shaking his head. "This'll take time to understand."

"We don't have the time, though," Gloria said. "That's the point. Right now, probably, the police are talking to the girl. If she identifies Elton—" Ominously, she let it go unfinished.

"He didn't try to kill her, though," Mitchell said. "He was going to try. He had the cord in his hands. But he didn't touch her."

"He would've tried, though," Flournoy said. "We've got to face that, face the fact that he would've tried. And we've got to do something, Austin." Flournoy turned to face him squarely. "We've got to get him out of town. Even if he's not actually convicted of anything, even if Harlan can get him off, the publicity of the arrest, of the trial—" Heavily, Flournoy shook his head. "It would be devastating."

"Where should we send him?" Holloway asked, once more looking at each of them in turn. "If he's with us, we can protect him. Like Mitchell did, tonight. But if he's in some other city—" He shook his head. "It'd be worse, not better. He'll—he'll do it again. And he'll be arrested. And the publicity will be the same, either way."

Gloria drew a deep, measured breath. "Elton's sick, Dad. We've known it for a long time. You've said so yourself, that you knew Elton was sick. We've known it, but we haven't done anything about it."

"He should have treatment," Flournoy said. "He should—" He paused. Then, speaking in a low, uncompromising voice, eyes hard, mouth set, he said, "He should have professional treatment. In a sanatorium, somewhere. Now. Right now."

"Where the police can't find him," Mitchell said. "He's got to be where the police can't find him. And he's got to be kept there. Physically kept there. Otherwise—" He shook his head, spread his huge hands. "Otherwise, they'll find him, and arrest him."

"He won't go," Holloway said. "I know Elton. He won't go. He won't go away, won't run. Whatever he's done—" He broke off, momentarily closing his eyes as he searched for the strength to finish it: "Whatever he's done, he's done it for God. He

believes he's God's instrument. So he won't run. And he won't refuse to answer questions, either. If anyone questions him—if they're smart enough, skillful enough—he'll tell them just that. He'll tell them everything. He'll insist on telling them everything. Believe me."

"He's God's instrument," Mitchell said. "He hears voices, and he does what they tell him. He told me that tonight."

"If he won't go away willingly, then we've got to force him to go," Gloria said. "Lloyd's right. He's got to be physically restrained if that's what it takes. And it's got to be done immediately."

Impatiently, Flournoy shook his head. "We can't force him to go to a sanatorium, though. Not unless we get a court order. Which, God knows, we don't want to get, because of the publicity."

With heavy emphasis, speaking slowly, Gloria said, "He's got to be confined. And he's got to be isolated. That's the bottom line." Impatiently, she gestured, compelling Holloway's close attention. "My God, *buy* a sanatorium. How much can it cost? Buy one in—in Europe, where the reporters will never find him."

At the thought, calculating, Flournoy looked up, his eyes sharpening.

"If one reporter finds him, though—" Holloway shook his head. "If just one found him, that's all it would take. And they're sure to ask why Elton isn't singing on Sundays."

"Tell them he's on a mission somewhere," Flournoy said impatiently. "South America, maybe. It's happened before. He was in Africa for two weeks. Remember those pictures we got—that canned footage?"

"A mission—" Holloway said it softly, reflectively—without hope. Missions ended. But madness went on forever.

"I hate to strike a crass note," Flournoy said, "but this couldn't come at a worse time. I mean, it's ironic—" Wincing as if he were in sudden pain, he sharply shook his head. "I don't know whether you were aware of it tonight. Austin, at the banquet, but at the end you had them absolutely riveted. Not at first, admittedly, which makes it so very significant. At the first,

they were probably the toughest audience you've ever faced. But, by God, at the end, they were yours. They're still yours, if you can deliver what they want. And then, to have this happen . . . now . . ." Flournoy shook his head.

Deliberately, Holloway allowed a long moment of silence to pass as he stared full into Flournoy's colorless eyes. Then, precisely on the beat that would produce the provocative emphasis he intended, speaking very softly, he said, "What is it, would you say, that they want from me?"

Holding Holloway's gaze with his own, Flournoy matched the other man's quiet gravity as he said, "They want to control the way the country votes. And they think you might be able to do that for them. And if you can—" Like Holloway, he allowed a significantly timed silence to finish the thought.

Holloway remained motionless for a moment, still staring at his chief of staff. Then, rising heavily to his feet, he turned to Mitchell. "I'm going to talk to Elton. Then I'm going to my room. I'm going to my room, and I'm going to ask divine guidance."

Also rising, Mitchell nodded silently, with deep compassion.

"You'll have him watched," Holloway said. "Closely."

"Yes," Mitchell answered quietly. "He'll be watched. Around the clock."

"Good. Thank you, Lloyd."

"You're welcome."

"I want you where I can find you, Lloyd, when I need you. Do you understand?"

With infinite regret, Mitchell nodded again. "Yes," he answered. "I understand."

24

He opened the door with a passkey, entered the room without knocking, slipped the passkey into his pocket. One lamp was lit, in a far corner of the room. Slightly snoring, Elton lay on his back, his head on the pillow. As Holloway approached the bed, he looked at the bedside clock, a reproduction of a French antique. The time was almost exactly midnight.

Should he remain standing while he spoke the words?

Should he awaken his sleeping son or let him sleep?

These were important considerations, matters of extreme gravity, once-in-a-lifetime decisions.

It was established, certainly, that the subconscious controlled the thoughts, therefore controlled the man. And it had also been established that, awake or asleep, the subconscious was alive, receptive. Therefore, even though his son was asleep, the words he was about to speak would register.

The words, the matching gestures, these were his stock-in-trade, the fountainhead of his success, the source of all his wealth—his wealth, and the wealth of others. Even, potentially, the wealth of nations, if he could believe what he'd heard tonight at the banquet.

At the thought he shook his head, raised his hand to lightly touch his temple. His thoughts were wandering. And if the thoughts wandered, so also would wander the words. And the world, his world, would fly apart if confusion overtook him and the words went wrong.

He was, he realized, momentarily confused, his little secret.

So far, his little secret. Since the euphemism of his cardiac event had cast its narrow, sharp shadow across his life, these moments of secret confusion had become more frequent, more disquieting, ultimately more threatening. And now it was happening again. The circuits were overloaded. Within hours, a few short hours, he'd been lifted to the heights, then dropped down to the lowest depths. Those closest to him had first told him what he'd wanted to hear, then told him what he didn't want to hear. They'd laid out the alternatives, as always. Then, as always, they'd left him alone, to make the decision.

Once he would have turned to God, prayed for guidance. He'd told them, earlier, that he intended to pray. Had they believed him? Or did they, like him, realize that, in his sixty-third year, his partnership with God had run its course, had been terminated by mutual consent?

Somehow, somewhere, he'd lost his faith—in exchange for twenty million viewers each Sunday. Minimum.

His account with God was square.

And, long ago, he'd settled with the Devil.

So there was nothing left but the benediction he'd come to pronounce:

"Of the four of us, Elton—you, your sister, your mother, and me—only two of us have survived. Gloria and I, we're the survivors. Why Gloria and not you, I'm not sure. I think it might have had something to do with the circumstances of your birth. I'm quite sure of it, in fact. I've never talked about it, never spoken the words. But now it's time. Now the words must be spoken—" Aware that, suddenly, the strength was leaving his legs and lower body, he stepped away from the bed, fumbled for a small bedside chair. The chair was draped with Elton's clothing, neatly folded. From the first, Elton had been a neat child, an orderly child.

Still fumbling, he swept the clothing to the floor, sat down, once more touched his temple, once more closed his eyes. Was his heart beating irregularly? Would death solve everything—his death, not Elton's death? Had God reconsidered their previous articles of agreement?

It was possible. Tonight, anything was possible.

But now, reprieved, he could feel strength returning. It was necessary, therefore, to begin speaking. He owed it to Elton, to begin speaking, as soon as strength permitted.

"Gloria, you see, was a love child. Your mother was only seventeen when Gloria was born. She was seventeen, and I was thirty-one. And your mother was essentially unformed. That's important to remember. She was a child of nature when we met. But I was complete, at age thirty-one. I was the same person then that I am now. For me, nothing's changed. But your mother—" He shook his head, lifted his arm, tilted the shade of the nearby lamp to put his face in shadow. "Your mother, I'm afraid, was damaged. She wasn't damaged giving birth. It was her father, I think, that damaged her. He was a minister, you see. And when he discovered that your mother was pregnant out of wedlock, his rage was monumental. He was a vindictive man, an avenging archangel. He put his mark on both of us—me, and your mother, too. She'd been more than a daughter to him since her mother died—more than a daughter, but less than a wife, so that it was a terrible blow for your mother when he was murdered. But, ultimately, it was God's judgment, and eventually your mother accepted that. Because, you see, her father had cursed her, burdened her with guilt when he accused her of sin. So your mother was blighted in her bloom, and Gloria was born under a dark cloud of vengeance.

"However, Gloria was unmarked. From the first, she was a laughing child. But your mother couldn't laugh. She was marked forever by her father's curse. She tried to escape it. God knows, she tried. She twisted and turned, and she cried in the night beside me But it was no use. She was lost. Forever lost.

"And then, later, when she was pregnant again, after Gloria was born, she suffered a miscarriage. And the damage begun by her father's wrath was compounded, grieviously compounded. Making it necessary, you see, for her to give birth again—to you."

As he said it he heard his son moan, saw him stir. Yes, the words were registering, even in sleep. Elton had always loved his

mother. In his own twisted, tortured way, he'd always loved her, always needed her.

"Gloria was unmarked," he said softly. "She escaped. But you were marked, Elton. Your grandfather reached out from beyond the grave and laid his curse upon you."

As his son stirred again, he once more broke off, his eyes fixed upon the face on the pillow, lying in a shaft of pale light from the window. Even in sleep, as always, the pale face was expressionless. But, beneath the sallow skin, small muscles twitched. Yes, the subconscious was listening.

"So you were born without love, Elton. Gloria was a love child, but you weren't. And—" He drew a long, deep sigh. "And that's the essence of it, I'm afraid. Love is a miracle, and you were denied it. I knew it when you were born. I knew you'd be blighted. Because, you see, by that time I no longer believed in miracles. They're just words now, Elton. Love—God—to me, they're just words. They're powerful words, as I well know. With those two words—love, and God—men like me can control the world. But before that's possible—before you can control how other men think, you've got to first realize that nothing's real, nothing is ever what it seems. Everything is a mirror image, Elton. That's the one essential truth. We live in a world of mirror images. Love isn't really love, and God really isn't God. There wouldn't be love if there wasn't loneliness. And there wouldn't be God if there wasn't fear. I finally discovered that, you see. I finally discovered that love doesn't change the world, and neither does God. It's fear that changes the world. Fear is the one great truth, the only real tool. If a man wants power—and we all do—he nourishes fear. Because hatred is what it's all about, Elton. It isn't love that drives us. It's hate. And hate and fear go together. That's obvious. So if you control them, manipulate love and hate, fine-tune them, you will control the world. But, of course, you don't use those words—never 'fear,' never 'hate.' You must always say 'love,' and 'God.' Always."

For a moment Holloway sat in silence, head bowed, his broad forehead delicately supported by long, gracefully tapered fingers.

When he began to speak again, his voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Now you know, Elton. You know I lost my faith. It probably happened very early. We're already formed, you know, at a very tender age, and I suppose I lost whatever faith I had in God at the moment I realized what a fraud my father was. Because when I made that discovery, I also learned about hatred. I learned about hatred and love, all at once, when I was just a child. You learned the same lesson, too, when you were very young. Oh, yes, Elton—I saw you looking at me. When I couldn't see you, I could feel you. I remembered, Elton. I remembered those ancient feelings of mine, remembered enough to know how you must hate me.

"Most of us make some kind of deal with the Devil, so we aren't consumed by hatred. But you couldn't do that, Elton. You don't bend, you break. That was our secret, Elton—the only secret we ever shared. We never talked about it, of course. So both of us were keeping the same secret from each other. That's what a family does when love turns to hate. They keep their secrets—hoard them, use them like weapons. Because secrets *are* weapons, the cruelest weapons of all.

"I never told you all this, of course. Parents don't do that. They can't afford the risk. So, instead, they buy their children expensive things, and send them to expensive schools, and they hope their children will provide some ornamentation for their lives, like a well-tended lawn or an impressive car. And you did that—at least on Sundays. You still do. So now—" He drew a long, labored breath, infinitely regretful. "So now you know the secret, Elton. You know about love and you know about hate. You know that hate is the only weapon that matters. But—" Once more, he deeply sighed. "But the secret's out, Elton. The secret's out, and my enemies have the keys to the armory. And if they open the doors, lay hands on my weapons, then it's all over. Everything." Slowly, struggling against a sudden, overwhelming lassitude, he rose to his feet, moved close to the bed, stood motionless for a moment, looking down at the figure in the bed,

the baby that had become a boy, the boy that had become a man . . .

. . . the man that had become a monster.

"If you thought God was commanding you, Elton, then I hope you die still believing it. Because then it will surely be true." He let a last long moment of silence pass, then said softly, "I'll never be forgiven. Never. I want you to know that, Elton."

He stooped, kissed his son on the lips, straightened, and automatically turned to the bedside lamp, about to switch it off. But then he remembered: Elton was afraid of the dark.

25

"So what you're telling me," Hastings said, "is that he didn't touch you. Is that right?"

"Jesus," she wailed. "I already *told* you. It wasn't the young one that was bothering me. It was the old one—the big one, with the goddamn gun. *He's* the one you want. Not the other one, the young one."

"Listen," Canelli said, "we'll tell you which one we want. You just tell us what happened, how it came down. Do you think you can do that?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, peevishly plucking at the tufted chenille bedspread, she sullenly shrugged.

"But the young one had the cord," Hastings said. "The gold cord. Is that right?"

"I already *told* you, he—"

"As often as I tell you to tell me," Hastings said quietly, "that's how many times you tell me. Otherwise, we'll haul your forty-dollar ass downtown."

"Fifty-dollar, please," she said wearily. "Not forty. Fifty."

"So—?"

She nodded. "Yeah, he had the cord. He was holding it in front of him with both hands. And I gotta say, he was pretty weird looking. Weird acting, too. But, Christ, you get used to that in this business. I mean, if it wasn't for the goddamn weirdos, we'd all be out of business, probably." She sighed, shook her head, turned to face Hastings squarely. "Listen, speaking of business, do you mind if—"

"So tell us about the cord, what happened to it?"

"Again?"

"Listen, Angie—" Hastings dropped his voice. "I'm not going to tell you again. Either you—"

Hastily, she raised both hands, palms out. "All right. Okay. Jesus—" She shook her head, plaintively exasperated. "What happened, after the big one broke in, and shoved me down on the goddamn bed, he took the cord, grabbed it out of the young one's hands. He went into the bathroom, and he must've flushed it down the toilet."

"Did you see him do it, flush it down the toilet?"

"Well, no. But I heard the toilet flush. Twice. Then he came out of the bathroom. And then they left."

"Mitch—the big one—he was the only one that went into the bathroom. He went in with the cord, and flushed the toilet twice. Then he came out, without the cord. And then they left. Is that right?"

She nodded heavily, mocking him as she said, "That's right, Lieutenant. Exactly right."

Hastings nodded thoughtfully. He looked at Canelli, who shrugged, signifying that he could think of nothing more to ask. Now Hastings withdrew a card case and pen, handed her two business cards and the pen. "Those are my cards, Angie. Write your address and phone on one of them, and give it to me. Keep the other, in case you think of anything you forgot to tell me." He watched her working with the pen, silently mouthing the words and numbers as she wrote. When she returned the pen and the card, he said, "And remember, if you even think about leaving town, it's your forty-dollar ass."

"Fifty-dollar," she muttered, reaching for her bag. "Fifty."

26

Holloway pulled the door closed, stood motionless for a moment, head bowed, leaning his full weight against the door frame. He was conscious of someone nearby: a security man, sitting at an ornamental table, eyes averted. Slowly, heavily, Holloway pushed himself erect, turned to his left, away from the security man. It was a reflex, a conditioned response, that made him stand erect and turn so that his face was averted. Because it was essential that his chosen mask of infallibility remain firmly fixed in place. If salesmen projected geniality and politicians pretended nobility, then the evangelist must cloak himself in eternal infallibility. Even though he was living through his lifetime's moment of disaster, he must keep the mask in place, playing the mummer's game.

To some men, this moment of truth came when danger threatened, or death suddenly loomed. Some faced this moment in an alleyway, some in a hospital room, some while they chased a tennis ball, or sat on the toilet, reflecting.

To him, it had come in these midnight hours, in this overdecorated hotel hallway, alone, with his tie loosened, wearing his bedroom slippers, an utter emptiness within, a desperate void of fearfulness where once there had been a fullness of faith and certainty. He could hear the sound that his slippers made on the carpeting: a slow, leaden scuffing, an old man's shuffling.

As he turned the corner of the adjacent corridor, an inexorable, apocalyptic choice confronted him, the parable of the doors.

One door—his—signaled a sad surrender to the inevitable. Christ's way, without question.

But there was another door—a second door.

Fittingly, his was the first door, requiring that he must make the choice, must go beyond his door . . .

. . . as he was doing now.

Must stand before Mitchell's door . . .

. . . as he was doing now.

Must take the talisman, the passkey, from his pocket . . .

. . . as he was doing now.

Must enter the room as silently as a murderer might . . .

. . . as he was doing now.

With the instant's touch of Holloway's hand on his shoulder, Mitchell's eyes came open, his whole body tightened. On the counterpane, his hands clenched into fists.

"Austin . . ." Mitchell blinked, sat up, reached for the bedside lamp.

"No—" Holloway raised his hand. "There's enough light from the street." As he spoke, he gestured to the view window.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

Holloway turned away from Mitchell to look out over the San Francisco skyline, one of the world's most exciting vistas. Somewhere out there, in a refrigerated drawer, lay the body of the woman Elton had murdered. In another part of the city, policemen were making their plans. Judges were issuing search warrants, arrest warrants. Reporters were asking their questions, cameramen were searching for targets.

And, always the enemies were waiting—the men with watchful eyes.

"Austin, are you all right?"

Still facing the cityscape, Holloway spoke slowly, softly: "I can still remember the first time we ever talked together, Lloyd. Do you remember?"

"Of course I do—in the warden's offce, it was."

"How old were you then? I've forgotten."

"I'm sixty-two now, and that was thirty-five years ago, at

least." As he spoke, Mitchell swung his thick legs over the edge of the bed and reached for his robe, draped across a nearby chair. Standing, he put on the robe, tightened the belt, turned down the collar. He decided to sit on the bed, decided to wait in silence for whatever was coming.

"More than half your life," Holloway said, "you've been with me."

"It's been the best half, Austin. You know that."

"Yes—" Gravely, Holloway turned to face the other man. "Yes, I'm sure that's true. You wouldn't say it, if it weren't true, Lloyd." He stepped to a nearby armchair, sank into it. On the bedside table, the clock read almost one o'clock. Tomorrow—Friday—would be a busy day, beginning with the news conference at eleven.

"You're the only one I can trust to tell me the truth, Lloyd—the whole truth. Gloria tells me the truth, but it's always tainted with rancor, because part of her hates me. Flournoy tells me the truth, if it suits his purposes. Otherwise, he lies. And Elton—" He shook his head. "Elton is blinded. And Marvella—" He paused, searching for the word. "Marvella suffers too much to think about what's true and what isn't true.

"So it comes down to you and me, Lloyd. It comes down to history—to all those years. All night, I've been thinking about those years. I've been thinking about myself, thirty-five years ago. I wasn't even thirty, when I heard that you might be paroled. Many times I've wondered what it was in that newspaper story that made me feel I must talk to you. It wasn't just because I needed a bodyguard. I could've hired a hundred men for a job like that."

"You needed more than a bodyguard, Austin."

"And, God, I *got* more than a bodyguard. And I got more than a friend, too. I've discovered that friendship—protestations of friendship—come pretty cheap. But when you stood between me and that crazy man with the gun, in Knoxville—" Marveling, he shook his head. Then: "You're the only one of us who really believes in God, Lloyd. You've killed human beings. You've killed before I knew you, and—God forgive us—you've killed

afterward, for me. But you're the only real Christian among us, the only one who hasn't been corrupted. You know what's right—and you know what's wrong. And, most importantly—" Holloway paused, preparing himself to measure the effect of the words he'd come to say: "Most importantly, once you've determined what's right, decided what must be done, you do it. You do your duty, regardless of the consequences." Looking at the other man, he allowed another carefully calculated beat to pass as he gazed deep into Mitchell's eyes. "That's rare, Lloyd. That kind of dedication, that magnificent disregard of consequences in the service of what's right, it's very rare. Someone like you, a man who truly disdains worldly goods, disdains the trappings of the ego, of vanity, you're unique among men. That sounds overblown, I know—highfalutin, as my father used to say. But I mean it. And you *know* I mean it. I've been preaching for so long, singing for my supper, that sometimes I don't know whether I'm simply talking, or whether I'm preaching. These lines get blurred as time goes on. But you know, Lloyd. You can recognize the truth, recognize your duty. And that's the whole point, the whole reason I'm here—because you know what's right. And you know what's wrong, too. You're my conscience."

Still sitting on the edge of the bed, his face impassive, his eyes steady on the other man's face, Mitchell made no reply. If he was aware of what must surely follow, he gave no sign.

"Sometimes," Holloway said, "I can hardly believe it, what's happened to me. Neither of my parents finished high school. Except for the Bible, I don't think my father ever read a book all the way through. My sister married a construction worker who beat her regularly. Until my father had a stroke, and the money, such as it was, quit coming in, I gave no thought to preaching. I was fifteen years old then, and my only thoughts were for girls. It was hard times, in 1937, especially in our town, with the lumber mill on short hours, and the main street half closed down. So, on Sunday, with much trepidation, I drove our Model A to the meeting place, and I eulogized my father—who I despised, really. I didn't have the faintest idea what I'd say, or how I'd say it. And I was scared. God, I've never been so scared, before or

since. But I got up on that stage, like I'd seen my father do, and I put my father's Bible on the pulpit, open, like I'd seen him do. Then I grabbed that pulpit as hard as I could, and I lifted up my face to the heavens, and I closed my eyes, and I waited for a miracle.

"And it happened. How—why—I'll never know. The words came from somewhere. To this day, I don't know where they came from, or why. But when I needed them, they were there. And they're still there, thank God. Sometimes, especially the last year or two, when I walk out to that pulpit, and face those cameras, it seems to me that the words will fail me. And I suppose they will someday. I suppose it's inevitable. And when that happens—" Reflectively, he shook his head. "When that happens, if it ever does, I doubt that I'll be ready. Because I'm famous now. And I have power, too. I discovered that tonight, discovered how much power I have. And if I'm honest with myself—honest with you—then I'll admit that I'm addicted to that power. Right from the first, I was addicted, right from that first Sunday when I looked out over those faces. I can still remember that Sunday. I don't think I was conscious of what I was saying. I think I just stood there, holding to that pulpit, with my eyes cast up to heaven. I opened my mind, and opened my mouth, and hoped for a miracle, as I said. And then, when the words did come, and I ventured to look down over the congregation, I could tell they were moved. And right then, right from that very first moment, I became aware that I could control other human beings. Through words, nothing more than words, I could rouse them, make them believe what I wanted them to believe, make them do what I wanted them to do. *Words*. Not armies. Not the power of money. Just words, and ideas." As if he were still marveling at the memory of that first meeting, Holloway sat silent for a moment, head slightly bowed. Then, softly ironic, he said, "So now I'm famous. World famous. And, thanks to Herbert, I'm rich. I've got money, and I've got property. There's the Austin Holloway University, and the Temple of Light—and those two satellites up there, solely owned. Not to mention the stocks and the bonds and the other real estate. And

not to mention, either, those fat cats at the banquet tonight. I've been reading upturned faces for a lot of years, now, Lloyd. And I can tell you, I can absolutely guarantee you, that those fat cats will give anything—*anything*—if we'll take them along with us. They've got the money, and they want the power—want what I've got. And, unless I'm very much mistaken, they'll pay anything, do anything, to have their way with the voters in this country."

Holloway let another moment of solemn silence lengthen. Then, speaking directly to Mitchell now, full-face, he said, "All that's on one side. Everything. And then—" He drew a deep, regretful breath. "And then there's Elton. There's Elton and his golden cord."

As the words fell between them, Mitchell realized that he was sitting straighter on the bed, unconsciously bracing himself.

"I've just come from Elton, Lloyd—just come from his room. He was sleeping—as soundly, as innocently as a baby sleeps. I sat beside his bed, and I talked to him. I don't think I've done that three times in my whole life, Lloyd—sat beside him and talked, whether or not he heard me. And I was aware of that, aware that I'd failed him. It was one of those moments when, suddenly, your life is reduced to its essentials. I could look back over fifty years as if they were no more than fifty minutes, beginning on that Sunday after my daddy's stroke. And I realized that from that first Sunday, my life was one long, elaborate illusion. I was an actor with only one part to play. I was one person when I got up onstage on Sunday, and another person during the week. I'd preach against the sins of the flesh, and the next night, in another town, I'd be in bed with a stranger. I'd preach against avarice while I schemed how to get rich. And there was the other thing, too, the thing only we know about, Lloyd. Just you and me."

"It had to be done, Austin. It *had* to be done. We both knew it, knew it had to be done."

"But you did it, Lloyd. I only talked about it. We prayed about it, side by side, on our knees. We prayed to God. It was the last time I did it, the last time I prayed to God." Shaking his head, as if to escape the sudden, searing pain of memory, he lapsed into

exhausted silence. Then: "I prayed, but you did it. You lifted up your hand. You struck the blow."

"I'd do it again, Austin. You know that." Mitchell paused. Then, speaking very deliberately, he said, "I *will* do it again. If that's what you want—if that's what has to be done—then I'll do it again."

Holloway sat motionless for a moment, head low, body slack, hands listless in his lap. Then, as if he were lifting an impossible weight, he raised his head to meet the other man's calm, steady gaze. In the pale half-light from the window, Holloway's eyes were haunted; his face was shrunken on itself, suddenly an agonized death's-head.

"It has to be done, Lloyd. We both know it, know it has to be done. But this time—" Hopelessly, he shook his head, closed his eyes, felt his voice thicken with the first genuine emotion he'd experienced in many years. "This time, we can't pray."

27

"Jesus Christ," Friedman grated, "it's Friday. In my experience, judges play golf or go to the track on Saturday. Then comes Sunday. And Holloway's show at the Cow Palace, I happen to know, goes from one o'clock to two o'clock. And then they're gone. By five o'clock Sunday, Elton could be in Los Angeles. We'll forward our stuff to Los Angeles, and the FBI will do the same. Which is to say, in plain words, that because we can't get warrants, we'll be screwed out of the bust of the decade, maybe the bust of the century, for all we know. And all because the people at City Hall think that Holloway is some kind of a saint. You want some more coffee?"

Hastings shook his head, then said, "I'm glad you mentioned City Hall. Because that's where the problem is, you know. The chief serves at the pleasure of the politicians."

"As far as I'm concerned," Friedman retorted, "they're all politicians." Glowering, he made his way to the cafeteria's coffee urn, refilled his Styrofoam cup, returned to the table. Even before he sat down, Friedman began to talk: "We've got everything but an eyewitness to the actual crime. We've got Dancer Browne, and we've got—what's her name, from last night?"

"Angie Forster."

"Yeah. And we've got Amy MacFarland's room sealed tight and guarded. Everything's covered."

"We don't have the gold cord, though."

"That's true. But if we could get his fingerprints and the clothes he wore on Tuesday, we could put him in that room. I

know it. I *feel* it. And then there's everything the FBI's got. It might not be admissible for trial, but it sure as hell should get us warrants."

"When I think about what happened last night," Hastings said, "hammering on that goddamn door while Mitchell was destroying evidence and then hustling Elton out the back way—" He clenched his right fist, struck it lightly on the Formica tabletop. "I'm going to get Canelli, and haul Mitchell's ass down here for questioning. I'm going to lean on the bastard. *Really* lean on him."

"Why don't you wait until tomorrow?" Friedman said. "Wait and see what happens tonight. The way it appears, Elton isn't controllable. I mean, if they could keep him in the hotel, I'm sure they'd do it. So the assumption is, all they can do is follow him, protect him from himself. That's what Mitchell was doing last night. Maybe the same thing will happen tonight or tomorrow night. After all, he's been out three times in four days—Monday night, Tuesday night, and Thursday night. The second time, he got his rocks off—killed Amy MacFarland, got away clean. So then, Wednesday and Thursday, we started poking around, putting the pressure on him. You talked to him, and I'm sure they've talked to him—Gloria, and her father, or whoever. So then, instead of lying low, like any reasonable serial killer would, he goes out last night presumably to try his luck again. He missed. He's frustrated. So maybe tonight he'll go out again and give it another shot."

"That's no reason I can't interrogate Mitchell, though. For that matter, we might be better off if we kept him locked up overnight, according to your theory. If Mitchell hadn't been there last night, maybe we'd have Elton in a cell right now."

Sipping his coffee, Friedman considered the point, then nodded. "That's a possibility, I suppose."

"So what'd you think? Should I go for it? Bring Mitchell in?"

"Why don't we see what happens tonight? Why don't we put on extra people tonight at the St. Francis? If it doesn't work out tonight, we can bring Mitchell down here tomorrow. I mean, he's

not going anywhere until Sunday, we know that. Meanwhile, we can keep up the pressure for the warrants on Elton."

Without enthusiasm, Hastings shrugged. "Whatever you say. You're the strategist." He glanced at the wall clock. "Maybe I'll have some coffee after all. Want anything else?"

"Thanks, no."

28

Covertly, Benton glanced at his watch, then looked at Holloway. Simultaneously, both men nodded. Benton took a last sip of coffee, checked his French cuffs, touched the knot in his tie, buttoned his jacket, rose, and half stepped to a portable lectern that had been placed on the head table. He cleared his throat, smiled, waited for those assembled to turn toward him and fall silent. During the shifting of chairs and the businesslike riffling of notebook pages, two TV cameramen looked to their equipment while three photographers looked to their Nikons. Altogether, the audience numbered twenty-six, a few more than projected.

"My name is Charles Benton," he began. "I've been with Austin Holloway for eight years. And in those eight years I've learned that after I've made sure that the reporters have been wined and dined, the wisest thing I can do is what I'm about to do now, which is introduce my friend Austin Holloway—and then step aside." As he said it, he turned to Holloway, smiling as he gestured with a full, courtly sweep of his arm.

To a perfunctory scattering of applause, Holloway rose, stepped to the lectern, seemed to smile intimately at each of the reporters in turn.

"First," he said, "I'd like to invite each of you to our service on Sunday. Your press passes are all you need to get in, and the front row'll be reserved for the press, as always. And let me say, before I forget, that we welcome picture taking—before, during, and after, whatever's your pleasure. And now—" The famous

smile widened, the famous voice dropped one warm, welcoming octave. "And now, I'm at your service, ladies and gentlemen. Please—" He raised a hand, as if to anoint them. "Please, ask anything at all. We're all friends here."

Immediately, three hands were raised. Holloway gestured to a young woman who was with one TV cameraman. She rose, raised her jaw aggressively, and spoke in a high, clear, assertive voice:

"Can you give us some idea of your history—your background? Are you a theologian, a graduate of a seminary?"

His smile was touched with conspiratorial, tolerant good humor, suggesting that they shared a playful secret, he and this competitive woman with her smug mouth and cold eyes.

"No," he answered, "I didn't go to college. I come from humble origins, I'm afraid—proud, pious origins, but humble, nonetheless. My father was a minister, you see, sprung from the soil of the Middle West, from farming folk. What he learned about religion, he learned from the Bible—from the Bible, and from God. Because my father was a simple, unsophisticated man. He believed—deeply believed—that if he listened long enough, and hard enough, he could hear God speak. He had faith, you see—a deep, abiding faith. And I submit to you that faith like that is what we lack in this day and age. So I'm proud to say that I share my father's simple faith. And that's why I've come here to San Francisco. I'm carrying a message. It's the same message my father carried, and it comes from God."

The young woman smirked. "Or so you believe."

"Yes, madam—" Gravely, Holloway inclined his silvery head. "So I believe So I deeply, devoutly believe." He let a beat pass, watched her pantomime a supercilious disbelief as she shook her head, resumed her seat. Then he turned to a middle-aged man, gray-haired, conservatively dressed.

"I'm Dick Frankle," the man said, "from the AP. Last night, you hosted a dinner for some of the most powerful men in America, here in San Francisco. It's my understanding that the possibility of forming a third political party was discussed. Would you care to comment, sir?"

"I'm afraid I can't comment directly on what we discussed last night. However—" He paused to consider, quickly reviewing how much he intended to tell—and not tell. "However, I can tell you—I'm delighted to tell you—that we reached a remarkable degree of unanimity last night. Nothing was formally decided. No commitments were made, no committees were formed. But we agreed—unanimously agreed, I think—that America stands at the crossroads. We agree that, on the one hand, America is singularly blessed. Our wealth is immense. Our energies, even though they may be depleted by drugs, and immorality, and irresolution, are nevertheless prodigious. But—" He paused, swept the closed, indifferent faces with eyes that both challenged them and calculated the true extent of their cynical disaffection. "But we agreed, last night, that in the process of becoming the richest, most powerful nation in the world, this country has lost its way. We've turned our back on God. Consequently, we're destroying this country from within. Drug use in America is reaching epidemic proportions. Illicit sex is glorified on every magazine rack, celebrated in Hollywood movies that, in our fathers' time, would never have been made. Even television has sold out to the pornographers. Homosexuality is running rampant. And, consequently, the family—the cornerstone of every civilization since time began—is disintegrating. In California, marriages barely outnumber divorces. Now—" He lowered his voice to a harder, more worldly note: "Now, this process—this decay—isn't irreversible. True, it's far advanced, grieviously far advanced. The hour is late, and time is therefore short. Because our enemies are watching, make no mistake about that. They are watching, and they are waiting—barbarians, clamoring at the gates. However, even though time is running against us, we believe—I believe, and my guests last night believe—that it's not too late for America. We believe it's still possible to get our message through to the people in this country who really care—who really want to help."

As he bowed his head, he covertly assessed the reaction. Yes, he had their attention. And perhaps their grudging professional respect.

"Assuming that you're right about sex in the media," Frankle said, "what would you do about it? How would you control it?"

"Moral pressure," Holloway answered. "Those same people who really care—who want to help, want to vote for candidates who'll carry their standards—they're the same people who turn the TV knob to respectable programs. They'll complain to the networks, too. And, instead of paying to go to corrupt movies, they'll go to church on Sunday, and drop their five-dollar bills into the collection plate."

Nodding good-naturedly, smiling, then shaking his head in mute concession to a point well made, Frankle sat down, reached for his half-filled glass of champagne.

The next question came from a tall young man who wore no tie, and who spoke in a high, thin voice: "What about censorship, Mr. Holloway? Would that help?" He asked it wide-eyed, projecting a half-mocking innocence.

"Censorship," Holloway said, "definitely would *not* help—not, at least, at this point. However—and I'd like to be clear about this—should moral persuasion fail, then a responsible government would certainly have to act. That's self-evident."

"Was that self-evident to your friends last night?" the young man asked.

"It wasn't discussed," Holloway answered crisply. "I'm giving you my opinion. No one else's but mine."

"How do you feel about abortion?"

"I think abortion is a sin."

"The law says a woman can have an abortion if she so chooses."

"Then the law should be changed. I intend to do everything in my power to see that it *will* be changed."

"If you should run for elective office, would that be part of your platform?"

"I have no intention of running for elective office. Ever."

"Then you believe in the separation of church and state?"

Holloway let a beat pass, then spoke carefully, concisely: "As I said earlier, I believe that our country is in crisis. And in times of crisis, everyone must help."

"So you don't believe in separating church and state?"

"I didn't say that. However, it's obvious that, in times of crisis, extraordinary measures must be taken. Morally, this country is under attack. We've got to repel that attack." Brusquely turning his attention away, he pointed to a middle-aged, overweight woman who was waving a fat palm high over her head.

"So far as I know," she said, "you're the only TV evangelist who's ever come to San Francisco. Can you tell me why?"

As engagingly as he could, Holloway smiled: a wide, rich smile, especially for her. "Just because everyone gave up on San Francisco without even a fight, madam," he said, "that's no reason I should give up, too."

The ripple of laughter was polite, no more. From this group, the newspaper stories and the TV footage would be mixed at best

Over the diminishing snickers, she said, "What do you think about gun control, Mr. Holloway? Are you for it?"

"No, madam, I'm against gun control. I'm against violence in all its forms. But I *am* for self-defense. And the truth is, the criminals in this country are armed to the teeth. In some cases, I'm told, the criminals have better weapons than the police forces they oppose. And so long as that's the case, then I think the God-fearing among us must arm themselves, too. I've never made any secret of it—I carry a gun, a Smith & Wesson .38. And whenever I get the chance, I practice with it."

Eyes widening, the plump woman sat up straighter. "On you? Do you carry it on you? Now?"

Benevolently, he shook his head. "No, madam. I carry it among my effects. But I can assure you that, at night, it's never far from my hand."

The young, aggressive woman who'd asked the first question was the only one still with her hand raised. Regretfully, Holloway acknowledged her.

"You mentioned homosexuality earlier. Do you consider homosexuality a sin, too?"

"Yes," he answered sternly. "Yes I do. I don't intend to quote to you from the Bible. But I think there's ample proof that God

considers homosexuality a sin. What other reason can there be for the AIDS epidemic that's sweeping this city?"

Her retort was cold, contemptuous: "AIDS is God's revenge against homosexuals. Is that what you mean?"

"I've already said what I mean, madam. Plainly, God approves whatever benefits mankind. And if homosexuality should somehow ever become universal, then civilization would surely die out. That should be obvious."

"It's just as obvious," she said, "that unrestrained reproduction would be disastrous."

He decided to smile, to raise a placating hand in benediction. "I don't believe, madam, that this is the time or the place to discuss matters of this complexity. Especially—" He smiled out over the audience, at the same time lifting his chin to give one of the TV cameramen a better angle. "Especially since I seem to sense that some of your colleagues are beginning to think about their deadlines."

Grudgingly, the young woman surrendered the floor as Benton rose to his feet, ready to close the meeting.

29

Outside, in the hallway, they waited. Downstairs, in the lobby, they waited. On the streets, in the cities, everywhere, they waited, the unclean women and the traitorous men—all of them watching, waiting, fingering their weapons, stalking him. Even Mitchell had gone over, had joined them, offered them his weapon. Mitchell, the last of the make-believe friends, the ultimate traitor, the big man with the gentle hands who had pretended to laugh with him when he was a child. But, all the while, Mitchell had plainly been making his plans, biding his treacherous time, patiently waiting for his orders. Until finally, last night, Mitchell had betrayed himself, revealed himself an enemy.

And with Mitchell's unmasking, the whole plot had come clear. He'd always suspected the truth, and now it had been confirmed: the men, enemies of the light, traitors of God, had always used the women, the unclean women, as their lures. He'd always suspected it, always believed that, really, the men were his real enemies, the women merely the pawns, the moveable whores.

Yet it had taken him all this time, until last night, to be sure. Completely, utterly sure.

From earliest memory, for as long as God had laid the burden upon him, he'd known this moment would surely come when he stood alone, completely alone, one man facing the multitudes, defiantly. Only Christ could have known this sorrow, this burden of betrayal.

Their plan, of course, was plain, transparently simplistic, unbelievably naive. By disarming him last night, they hoped to deter him. But if Christ, surrounded by enemies—and, yes, one traitor—had refused to bend, then he, too, would surely prevail.

But it must be tonight. Now. Before they could make more plans, gather more assassins. He must rise from the chair that, for the last hour, had held him a prisoner. Then he must change his clothes, taking care that his clothes were different, always different. Tonight, he would wear a necktie. One tie, around his neck . . .

. . . and another tie, in his pocket, ready.

At the thought, he gently smiled. Because he'd known, long ago, that this moment must come, when they would seek to disarm him, for their own purposes. And, accordingly, he'd anointed this one necktie, this secret necktie, with all the properties that were required.

The foot-long length of three-quarter-inch pipe lay on the bed, heavy enough to make its own indentation in the quilted bedspread. Buttoning his vest and slipping on his jacket, Mitchell picked up the pipe, slipped it up the left sleeve of his jacket against the inside of his arm. Straightening his left arm down along his side, he was able to support the pipe in the cup of his hand, concealing it from all but the most meticulous observer. He stepped in front of the mirror, moved his left arm up and down, closely watching the telltale sag of the sleeve.

It was possible that, tonight, the police would stop him, question him. The concealed pipe might be all the excuse they needed to arrest him. The .45 automatic in its shoulder holster wouldn't endanger him. For the .45 he had a permit, a personal permit, separate from the permit he had for the .357 that he carried on duty. The pipe, though, bought two hours ago in a downtown hardware store, could spell disaster.

But the decision had already been made; the choice was no longer his.

He looked at his reflection one last time, verified that, with the arm held straight down at his side, the bulge of the pipe was

hardly visible. The surgical gloves, bought in a drugstore before he bought the pipe, lay limp and lifeless on the bureau beneath the mirror. With his right hand, he slipped the gloves in a side pocket.

Conscious of the pipe's awkward weight, he lifted his left arm, pushed back the cuff, looked at his wristwatch. The time was almost nine-thirty—time to take up his post.

"Why don't you go to the can?" Canelli said. "Go to the can, and get rid of it. And then go home. Christ, you look terrible, all pale, and sweating. It's stomach flu, sure as hell. It's going around, you know. My sister's whole family had it last week."

"I'll go to the can," Friedman said, rising cautiously to stand erect. "But then I'll come back, wait for a replacement."

"Whatever." Canelli waved the other detective away. "Just go to the can. You aren't going to be much good with a pants full, you know, if the suspect shows up. Besides, the lieutenant just called about fifteen minutes ago. He's on his way down, should be here any second. So what's the problem?"

"All right, I'll take a crap, then I'll come back, see what the lieutenant says." Mincingly, Friedman began walking stiff-legged across the crowded hotel lobby. Sympathetically shaking his head, Canelli settled himself more comfortably against a massive Grecian-style marble pillar, refocusing his attention on the bank of elevators.

"Going out?" Mitchell asked, stepping into the elevator to stand beside Elton. Two men and a woman, brightly talking, companionably laughing, were the only other passengers.

Eyes front, standing close to the door, Elton gave no sign that he'd heard.

"I'll walk with you," Mitchell said.

"No."

Stepping close and lowering his voice, Mitchell whispered, "Then I'll follow you. Like I did last night."

The doors slid open. Elton stepped out of the elevator, began walking in a straight line directly across the lobby to the

revolving doors. Standing beside the newsstand, Canelli saw the suspect come out of the elevator, closely followed by Mitchell. Canelli stepped away from the newsstand, switched on the surveillance radio clipped to his belt, verified that, yes, the red light was glowing. He put the tiny plastic earpiece in his ear, pressed the "transmit" button, spoke into the tiny microphone concealed in the palm of his hand.

"St. Francis one." As he released the "transmit" button, Canelli looked anxiously toward the hallway that led to the men's room. How long had Friedman been gone? Two minutes? Three? It was hardly enough time to let down his pants, get himself settled on the toilet seat.

He checked the radio's volume control, checked the cord connecting the earpiece to the radio, pressed the "transmit" switch again. Across the lobby, Elton Holloway was halfway to the revolving doors, walking steadily, looking straight ahead, his eyes blank. Mitchell was a dozen paces behind, grimly determined, moving as stolidly as a beat cop grinding out his shift.

"St. Francis one. Smitty, come in. *Quick.*"

Not even static came from the walkie talkie. Canelli looked at the north arcade, which led to the hotel's Post Street entrance. Was there time to reach Smith and Backus, stationed at Post Street? Already, the suspect had his arm raised, ready to push through the revolving doors. Somewhere in the night, Lieutenant Hastings was driving toward the hotel. He could be a block away, a mile away, a city's length away. Without a radio or a telephone, it was impossible to know.

Friedman. Smith and Backus. Hastings. none of them could help. As Canelli began moving toward the revolving door, he thumped the walkie talkie hard with his knuckles, and was momentarily rewarded by a brief sizzle of static followed by silence.

Ahead, the neon glow was growing, an obscene color splash against the dark sky, brighter than the stars, beckoning the sinners, guiding them, luring them, finally snaring them.

If spiders spun webs, then whores lit the neon lights.

First the lights, then the darkness.

And finally, inevitably, death.

If the lights were bright, the body was dark: the pit consuming the shaft of unclean flesh, digesting it, both of them diseased The woman, like the spider, killed one man, consumed him, then set her snare for the next, and the next.

Until, finally, she must pay with her life.

First she was judged at the bar of celestial justice, in absentia. Then, with the sentence pronounced, absolved of earthly consequences, he was given the warrant. Thus was the Devil defeated, his minions rendered impotent.

Until last night.

Until Mitchell, the Judas traitor, had joined forces with the Devil, betraying him.

Mitchell, the companion of his earliest memories, the big man with the gentle hands, had stalked him last night, betrayed him. Just as now, the enemy unmasked, Mitchell was stalking him again, surely seeking to betray him again.

Unless . . .

As the beginning of a thought surfaced, the rhythm of his footsteps faltered. His gaze, which must be strictly focused, must be tunneled only straight ahead, was inexorably widening, as if he were about to turn his head, about to look behind.

Because, yes, he could see it now, could glimpse a small forbidden sliver of possible truth, God's secret stratagem, knowledge denied to all but the chosen, God's most trusted, most precious few.

Because, yes, even God needed them, the double agents.

Mitchell, and the other chosen few.

Therefore, he was no longer moving forward. Instead, he was standing motionless, feeling the jostling of humanity and yet not feeling them, the unclean bodies, the sinners surrounding him.

If he listened carefully, closely, he could hear the truth, God's forbidden truth, celestial secrets disguised as ordinary voices, ordinary laughter. He could listen, and even smile as, himself all-knowing, the initiate now, he turned to face the friend of his

childhood, God's double agent, therefore now surely his secret ally.

Lightly, vehemently, Hastings tapped his clenched fist on the steering wheel. Both sides of Post Street were lined solidly with illegally parked cars. The sidewalks were crowded with high-spirited pedestrians, part of the city's Friday night frenzy of barhopping merriment. During three traffic light changes, he'd advanced less than half a block. The time was almost ten o'clock, the time that Elton Holloway had left the hotel, both on Tuesday night and last night. Impacted in traffic, without knowing the frequency Canelli was using, he was cut off from the surveillance operation during its most critical phase. Ahead, beyond the Powell-Post intersection, a foot patrolman was walking past a brightly lit store window. Should he leave his car on Post Street, collar the patrolman, order him to take charge of his car? Should he try for a patch-through to the desk clerk, who could call Canelli to the phone?

Or should he simply wait it out, try to relax, try to calm a stomach that was beginning to rumble ominously?

Stopping momentarily on the crowded sidewalk, Mitchell stepped into the doorway of a video arcade. Turning to face the display window, he took the surgical gloves from his pocket, surreptitiously slipped them on, then rejoined the pedestrian flow, walking briskly now, to close the distance. Earlier in the day, walking this same route, he'd picked the place where it must happen, barely a block and a half away, on Mason Street.

At the corner of Geary and Powell streets, Canelli stopped, turned, looked back to the entrance of the St. Francis, a half block behind. Beyond a long line of yellow cabs, he saw a car that looked like a dark-colored Honda turning the corner from Post Street to Powell. Was it Lieutenant Hastings's car? Could he afford to wait until he was sure, afford to gamble? Would Elton take the same route he'd taken Tuesday and Thursday, walking west on Geary to Mason, then south on Mason, deeper into the

Tenderloin? Already, Mitchell was a half block away, walking steadily. Elton, the smaller figure, had already disappeared in the Friday night crowds.

If he waited for help, Canelli risked losing both of them.

But without help, he might risk his life.

Always, it happened like this: weeks—days—hours of plodding police work compressed into a few make-or-break moments, everything reduced to a single can't-win decision.

Quickly, he stepped into the intersection, arms spread, palms wide, stopping the slow-moving traffic. Then, jumping up and down in the middle of Powell Street, facing the anonymous Honda, he waved his arms crisscrossed over his head.

The night was a madcap medley of San Francisco sounds: cable car bells clanging raucously, automobile horns bleating, doormen whistling for cabs, Friday night revelers laughing, calling to one another—all of it focused on Union Square, the city's good-time center, daytime-bright in the glare of a thousand lights. Ahead, down the Powell Street hill, two cable cars were coasting toward the turntable at Market Street. A third cable car had stopped fifty feet short of the St. Francis, waiting for the Powell–Geary intersection to clear before the gripman took another hold on the cable. Two more cable cars, filled with passengers, were coming up from the turntable.

Turning right into Powell Street, Hastings had a choice: get in the taxi line, or get behind the stopped cable car. Choosing the cable car, he guided the Honda out of the taxicab line, let it coast slowly ahead, downhill.

As the Honda came to a gentle stop, Hastings saw a familiar figure standing beside the smartly uniformed figure of the St. Francis doorman. It was Friedman, looking anxiously up and down Powell Street, plainly worried. Repeatedly, Hastings pressed the horn button, but realized that the sound would be lost in the din of traffic. He stopped the car, set the brake, put his SFPD placard on the dash, got out of the car in the middle of the street. As he trotted on an angle to the curb, slipping between two parked cabs, he heard the shrill blast of a police whistle. The

sound focused Friedman's attention, and Hastings waved, catching Friedman's eye. From behind him, almost as loud as the whistle, came the predictable bellow:

"Hey, buddy."

Walking to meet Friedman, Hastings half turned, beckoned the uniformed man to follow as he took out his shield case, showed the patrolman his gold badge.

"What is it?" Hastings asked Friedman. "What's happened?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. I'm sick. Stomach cramps, bad—the flu, I guess. I was in the bathroom for maybe five minutes, on the can. When I came out, Canelli was gone. I checked with Smitty and Backus, on Post Street. But they didn't hear from Canelli."

"Has he got a radio?"

"Sure."

"Do you?"

"No."

"How do you feel? You look terrible."

"I *feel* terrible."

"You go back inside—" Hastings pointed to the lobby. "Phone in. Get two more people here, right now. Then stay by the phone—in the house detective's office, my authority. Clear?"

"Yessir."

"I'm going to take a chance, go down Geary to Mason, the way Elton went before. Got it?"

"Yessir." One hand on his stomach, Friedman turned gingerly away, began walking painfully toward the lobby doors. Hastings turned to the patrolman, holding out his arm, keys dangling from a forefinger. "Here's the keys to the Honda. Park it, lock it, give Inspector Friedman the keys. Then stand by, out here, until I come back. Tell Friedman you'll be out here."

"Yessir."

Hastings turned away, began running south on Powell Street.

Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, he turned deliberately now to face Mitchell. The big man was advancing, his squared-off face implacable, resolution bunching at the shoulders,

clenched in either hand, moving the legs like round wooden posts made of muscle, a miracle, perhaps—the second of the night's revelations, this man who might not be mortal, but instead a being from the dimension beyond, flesh but not flesh, substance but not substance, God's centurion in his earthly disguise

Yes, it was the movements of the members that was the final, substantive delineation: muscles but not muscles, the ultimate proof that Mitchell had been transformed, would therefore reveal himself.

Yet caution was essential, even though recognition had finally been achieved—as if when he was younger, so very young, Mitchell might have given him the secret, or even . . .

Even . . .

Was it possible?

Anticipating the miracles of electronics still to come, was it possible that Mitchell had been implanted with a receptor that matched his own? Their receptors could have been preprogrammed for activation now, for this time of recognition, revealing the essential secret they shared since, last night, skillfully pretending to be one of them, the infidels, Mitchell had done what he must to preserve his secret identity, conceal his true status, God's chosen emissary, his ultimate protector.

Yes, it was a masterful choice.

But, as always, the receptors knew.

Because plainly, when their flesh touched, if only for a moment, Mitchell had managed to activate the circuits within, charging the receptor beneath the skin, therefore completing the secret electronic loops.

So it was a guessing game that they must play—the same games they had always played, the boy and the man. He would guess. With his fingers touching some secret part of himself—his heart, or his temple, at first—he would guess. Silently, communicating only electronically, not verbally, he would guess.

And then, when Mitchell nodded—once, only once—he would know.

Finally, ultimately know . . .

Therefore saved.

Released, therefore, to continue unthreatened, therefore safe. Finally, eternally safe.

At the intersection of Mason and Geary, panting, stumbling, Hastings slowed to a trot, then to a walk as he stepped into the street, momentarily stopping as he tried for a better angle, scanning the sidewalks on both sides of Mason. Ahead, across from the Bayside Hotel, just as it had been parked on Tuesday night, he saw Dancer Browne's Continental. Drawing air deep into his lungs, Hastings began trotting again, dodging, sharply bumping shoulders, forcing his way through the sidewalk crowds. As he came closer to the Continental, he saw Canelli suddenly step from between two parked cars on the far side of the street, anxiously waving. Gratefully slackening his pace, Hastings waited for a break in the traffic, then crossed the street to meet Canelli, running toward him.

"Jeez, Lieutenant, am I glad to see you."

Nodding, struggling for breath, hands on hips, head low, Hastings managed to ask, "What's up? Where are they?"

"In the next block—" Canelli pointed toward Market Street. "I been tailing them, and also looking out for you, or someone. I figured you'd probably—"

"Let's go." Hastings turned, began walking as fast as exhaustion would allow. "Show me. Tell me while we walk."

"Here—" Mitchell gestured to the entryway of an all-glass storefront displaying cameras and radios. "Let's stop a minute." As he spoke he looked quickly behind them. Across the street, standing between two parked cars, looking back the way he'd come, Inspector Canelli was broadly, urgently waving. Reinforcements, Canelli's backup, had arrived. All the time—all the years. all the memories, all the pain—it had come down to this moment, this place: eternity unhinged, sanity shattered, all of it focused in this pale face before him, the child grown into a madman, this monster with nothing behind his eyes. The monster raved, but the child still mewled, words twisted into gibberish, his hands bent to implore, abjectly appealing to a god long lost:

"All this time," Elton was saying, "all these years, and I've never known. But now I see, finally I see, why they sent you."

For a moment, one last long moment, Mitchell made no reply But sadness —regret—took time, and danger was coming closer: the two detectives, walking shoulder to shoulder now.

"Here—" He took the thin forearm in his massive hand, drawing the other man away from the display window, toward the place he'd chosen, the alleyway close by. "Here, Elton. There's something I've got to show you, something you've got to see, before we talk anymore."

"Yes—" Solemnly, the young man nodded. "Yes, I knew it—*know* it. That's what I said, what I meant, when I said that I see. We're together now, just the two of us. And nobody knows, will ever know."

"Please—quick. *Quick.*" Tightening his grip, he looked a last time backward, calculating the distance, therefore the time. If the sidewalk was brightly lit, neon glaring, the alley was dark —and, yes, deserted. Thank God, deserted.

No, God couldn't come into it, not now, not tonight. God must be blind tonight. Mercifully, charitably blind.

"Here—" A final tug, and they were alone in the darkness: the damp-smelling, garbage-reeking darkness. Momentarily alone.

He released Elton's forearm, stepped one pace back, dropped his left arm, gripped the pipe with his right hand as it fell free from the sleeve.

"Hey—" Canelli pointed. "*Hey.* Where'd they *go*?"

"Come on—" Sprinting ahead, fighting free of pedestrians, Hastings reached across his body and yanked his revolver from its spring holster. Beside him, slightly behind, Canelli was loudly swearing. Five running strides took Hastings to Ellis Street: two lanes of traffic, jammed bumper to bumper. Throwing up his left arm, he drew back from a bouncing front bumper, heard brakes protesting, tires squealing, horns blaring, drivers shouting.

"Hold it," the two detectives called in unison, bobbing, weaving, shouting obscenities. "*Police. Hold it.*"

Until, finally, they were on the opposite sidewalk, wildly running, both of them already breathing hard.

As the pipe fell free from his left sleeve, Mitchell grasped it firmly with his right hand. Holding the pipe low, concealed along his right leg, invisible in the alleyway darkness, Mitchell raised his left arm, pointing back to the brightly lit street. Instantly—mercifully—Elton turned his head, following the gesture. Mitchell raised the pipe, asked for forgiveness, brought the pipe down on the narrow, unprotected head, striking squarely on center. Sighing softly, twisting, Elton fell to his knees, sighed again, toppled to his left side, his face striking the pavement. Once more the pipe flashed up, then down again, this time sinking into the crushed bone of the skull, a bloody pulp.

He dropped the pipe beside the body, knelt, ripped at the hip pocket, found the wallet. He took the money, dropped the wallet beside the pipe, straightened, thrust the money in his jacket pocket as he began walking fast down the alley, away from Mason Street. As he walked, keeping close to the buildings, in deepest shadow, he looked over his shoulder, scanning the mouth of the alley. The rectangle of light from Mason Street limned the shape of the dead body, already shapeless, strangely amorphous.

Arriving first at the alley, Hastings threw himself against a brick building front, raised the muzzle of his revolver, held his breath, listening. Then, pivoting as he crouched, legs spread wide, revolver level, he sprang forward, into the dark rectangle of the alley's mouth, darker still beyond the glare of the street.

"Jesus," he muttered seeing the body. "Jesus Christ." With Canelli behind him, covering, Hastings knelt, cocked his head, looked into the dead face, its left cheek flattened against the slime of the uneven paving bricks. In the uncertain light, the slime had a pale, silverescent sheen, a contrast to the dark, fluid crimson of the blood.

Elton Holloway. Dead.

Not Mitchell dead. But Elton.

As Canelli began to speak, Hastings sharply raised his hand as

he straightened from his crouch, turned to face down the long, dark length of the alley.

"Shhh. Listen."

What was it, that soft scurry of sound? Footsteps? Rats? Imagination, abetted by a cop's sudden fear of dark, silent places?

With a working radio, they could call for backup, get lights, get the other end of the alley covered, get shotguns. Working in unison, a trained team, four men could slowly, carefully flush him out, nobody hurt—

—nobody killed.

"He's got to be here somewhere," Hastings whispered. "He didn't have time to make it to the other end."

"Yeah."

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

"Keep to the sides, out of the light."

"Right."

Moving to his left, picking his way through the nauseous litter of plastic refuse bags and raw garbage, crouched low, Hastings began silently advancing.

Standing motionless in the shadow of a doorway, he stripped off the surgical gloves, dropped them behind a dumpster, unbuttoned his jacket, drew the .45 automatic from its shoulder holster. Was there a cartridge in the chamber? To make sure, he must pull back the slide, let it slam forward, carrying a cartridge from the clip into the receiver. But the sound, in the silence of the alley, would betray him. So, gambling, he must cock the gun: two clicks, drawing the hammer through half cock to full cock.

He couldn't run. He'd never been a runner. So he must wait for them. He must take careful aim, must squeeze the trigger—and hope the gun fired.

With his back pressed hard against the steel of the door, pistol raised, ready to fire, he drew a long, deep breath. He could feel the hammering of his heart, hear the rush of blood at his temples.

But he could control it, control his body. However the heart

hammered, the blood rushed, the demons raged, his mind was still clear, his hand still steady.

What had to be done was done, finally finished. They'd been created together, Elton the infant, himself already a man, both of them created by the same man.

But first, the hunted tracking the hunters, he must identify the sound of approaching footsteps, must separate that sound from the other sounds of the hostile night. He must distinguish substance from shadow, movement from stillness. He must find them, sight them over the barrel of his pistol.

Then he must kill them.

Kill them, and escape, return to the father who had just lost a son.

In the deadly silence of the alleyway, the night sounds were individualized, eerily clarified: a distant siren, the thunder of a departing jet, rock music, auto horns, someone crying, someone swearing—all of them concealing a soft shuffle of footsteps on paving stones, a rustle of clothing, the metallic scrape of a weapon: the sounds of the urban jungle, the sounds of life or death.

Across the alley, the squared-off shape of a dumpster cast a long, dark shadow. Above the dumpster, light from a second-story window fell on a building wall beside Hastings. If Mitchell was crouched beside the dumpster, and Hastings stepped into the rectangle of light . . .

The thought—the fear—had locked his knees, forced his back sharply against the rough brick wall, numbed him at his center, closed his throat, left him momentarily helpless. If he were alone, he could have gotten out of it, gone back the way he'd come, to the safety of Mason Street.

But Canelli was there, his witness.

And he was there, Canelli's witness.

So, separately, each of them trembling inside themselves, secretly afraid, they must nevertheless continue this deadly game, each fearing disgrace more than death. They must—

Across the alley, from the shadow of a doorway, pale light

glinted on moving metal: a gun barrel, tracking him. As he dropped facedown, the shots sounded. Bullets screamed, ricocheting: one shot, and another. And another. He was rolling—once, twice, bricks bruising elbows and knees: a merciful pain, better than the bullets tearing into his flesh. He was on his feet now, crouched, springing across the alley, crashing against the clanging side of the dumpster.

Safe.

"Canelli. You okay?"

"Okay, Lieutenant." The reply came from across the alley. Good. When Canelli saw him cross to this side, Canelli had crossed to the opposite side and crouched low behind a row of garbage cans, safe.

Both of them, safe.

"He's in the doorway, on this side. Ten feet up the alley."

"Right."

And now, yelling: "Give it up, Mitchell. Throw it down. You've got—"

Footsteps, clattering: slow, clumsy footsteps, running.

Exposing only his head and his revolver, Hastings looked, saw him: Mitchell, shoulders hunched, head down, legs pumping slow-motion: an old man, running, escaping.

"Hold it. Freeze."

Across the alley, with his torso showing above the garbage cans, Canelli was crouched over his gun, holding the big .357 Magnum with both hands, head low, crouching in the approved departmental stance.

"*Hold it.*" Hastings raised his gun, fired in the air. Above him, a woman screamed, a man was shouting, loudly swearing.

As if he'd been hit, Mitchell suddenly faltered, fell heavily to the pavement.

Was he giving it up? Was he—?

"No—" Canelli yelled. *"Don't."*

But the big man in the blue business suit was on one elbow, lifting his arm, raising his hand, aiming the pistol at Canelli—

—as Canelli fired. Once. Twice.

The first shot drove Mitchell back against the pavement, his head smacking the bricks like a rotten melon.

With the second shot the big man's body bucked, as if he'd been kicked hard. Then he lay still, with only the fingers of one hand slightly twitching.

30

As Holloway checked himself in the bathroom mirror, then raised his wrist to check the time, Flournoy spoke through the open bathroom door:

"I still say you should think about this, Austin. It's too early. You should be in seclusion, not talking to reporters. Besides, you don't know what they know--what they've found out from the police."

"It'll take the police days to decide how they're going to handle this, what they're going to do. They'll be looking for guidance. That's what I intend to give them. Guidance." He turned away from the mirror, walked into the living room. Dressed in funereal dark blue, Flournoy was standing in the middle of the room. His expression was grave.

"Austin, we've got to talk."

"It's ten o'clock. We told the reporters ten o'clock."

"I think you should wait for Harlan, Austin, before you make any public statements. I really do. He's probably at the airport by now. You should wait for him."

Decisively, Holloway shook his head. "I don't want to talk to the press with a lawyer beside me. That's begging the question, a presumption of guilt. You should understand that, Herbert."

"I'm not saying you should have him beside you on camera. That's not what I'm saying. But you should talk to him, get his advice, before you go ahead with this."

"Herbert, the few times I've ever taken other people's advice on what to say, it's been disastrous. I learned long go that

whatever it is we're selling, it comes from me—from deep down inside me, from my subconscious, if you will. When I keep to that—when I'm talking from deep inside, operating on instinct, that's when I'm most effective. And that's what I intend to do now downstairs. I think I know what needs to be done. I have faith that when I start speaking, the words will be there."

"I understand that, Austin. And, basically, I agree with you. But I'm saying that—"

"I know what you're saying, Herbert. But you must listen to what *I'm* saying." He paused, compelling the other man's fretful attention. "I'm saying that, for better or worse, your fortunes—and mine, too—are tied to whatever it is inside me that produces the words and the gestures and the smiles and the frowns that constitute our entire stock-in-trade. That's always been the case. It's still the case, in good times and bad. And these, certainly, are the bad times. But I'm convinced—I feel deeply—that those inner thoughts will see us through."

"Austin—" Tentatively Flournoy stepped closer, to touch the other man's sleeve. "Austin, I'm not disputing that. I'm simply saying that you've had a shock. We've all had a shock. And I'm suggesting that you should—" He broke off, searching for the phrase. "You should give yourself time, that's all."

"The reporters have been here all night, sniffing around. They've been talking to the police, too. They're going to print something, that's a certainty. I want to make sure they get it right."

Resigned, Flournoy first shook his head, then shrugged, then reluctantly nodded. "If that's what you want . . ."

"That's what I want, Herbert. I've never been more sure of anything, never seen things more clearly."

"What about Sunday? Have you thought about Sunday?"

"Of course."

"And?"

"And it will be a memorial service, of course. For Elton."

"Before I take your questions," he said, "I'd like to make a statement, if you'll allow me." Solemnly, standing erect behind

the lectern, he paused, waited for their murmur of sympathetic assent to subside.

"As you all know," he began, "my wife and I—along with all our friends—have suffered a grievous loss. Our only son, Elton, died. And Lloyd Mitchell, too, died, at the same time, in the same horrible accident.

"Most of you know in general what happened. But many of you might not know the details. So, if you'll bear with me—" He paused, allowed his voice to thicken, his eyes to mist. He cleared his throat, wiped judiciously at the corner of each eye.

"It was perhaps inevitable," he said, "that Elton would die as he did last night. For months—years—myself and my wife had feared the knock that finally fell on our door last night.

"Because, you see, each of us must serve God in our own way, in our own time. I was only fifteen when God called me to his service. I was called to finish the work my father began. My call was to the pulpit. But Elton's call was different. Like Sister Teresa—like Christ himself—Elton realized that he must go out among the people. He realized that he must seek out the sinners, talk to them, lay hands on them, help them find their way to God's salvation.

"It was dark, dangerous work. My wife worried about Elton, and so did I. But we respected Elton's calling, respected his convictions. So, as all parents do, we worried in silence, knowing that we couldn't, and shouldn't, try to dissuade Elton from the way he'd chosen to serve God.

"Instead, whenever Elton went forth into the mean streets, I sent a protector along behind him—a guardian angel. That man was Lloyd Mitchell, to whom I've entrusted my life for more than thirty years. Wherever I went, whatever risks I might have taken in God's service, Lloyd was always beside me, protecting me from God's countless enemies.

"And so it was, my friends, that, last night, about ten o'clock, Elton left the safety of his hotel room and went out into the city streets, looking for souls to save. And, as always, Lloyd followed, the silent, secret protector. According to his custom, Elton went deep into the heart of the city's secret center of

corruption, where women sell their bodies, and vicious men prey on the virtuous.

"And so it happened that last night, from out of the shadows, Elton was attacked. He was struck on the head, and was pulled into a darkened alleyway, where he was robbed and left to die. It happened suddenly. One second he was alive, the next second his skull was crushed, and—" Holloway broke off, fighting to control a surge of strong, real emotion. Drawing on deep reserves, he said, "—and he was dying." Another pause, to regain control. Then, with the worst behind him, concluding: "Lloyd Mitchell was following Elton, only a half block behind. But, by the time Lloyd reached Elton, it was already too late. And then, tragically, a terrible accident happened. Lloyd had drawn the pistol he always carries, and as Lloyd bent over Elton, with his pistol in his hand, two detectives—Lieutenant Frank Hastings and Inspector Joseph Canelli—arrived on the scene with their own guns drawn. To the policemen, in the darkness, it probably seemed that Lloyd was the murderer, bending over his victim to rob him. Or perhaps Lloyd thought the policemen were the murderers, returning to the scene of their crime. In any case, shots were fired—and Lloyd was killed." He broke off, drank water from a glass placed on the lectern, sadly shook his handsome head. "Of course, we do not blame the police for this terrible tragedy. We realize that they, like us, are victims." As he spoke on a falling note, concluding, he bowed his head, let the moment lengthen into a long silence, an impromptu benediction. Still with his head bowed, he listened for cues: an embarrassed clearing of throats, a shifting of chairs, a few self-conscious whispers. Having been manipulated into joining him in something like silent prayer, the irreverent members of the press were restive. Therefore, it was time to raise his head, square his shoulder, manfully say, "If you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them."

"Will you be canceling your service tomorrow?" a woman asked.

"After much thought—much prayer—we've decided that we must go on with the service," he answered. "For one thing, it's

what Elton would have wanted. Both my wife and I feel very sure about that. And, secondly, we have a duty to go on—a higher duty, to God. We are, literally, soldiers serving in the ranks, God's crusaders. Two of our members have fallen, one struck down by a sinner. But we cannot lay down our arms. When the battle—the war—is done, finally won, then we can pause to grieve. But not now."

"You're known for your opposition to gun control," a man said. "In fact, you told us at your last news conference that you always carry a gun with you. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir, that's true."

"However," the man said, "unfortunately it seems pretty clear that, as you describe one of last night's killings, it would never have happened if Lloyd Mitchell hadn't had a gun. So my question is, will your loss cause you to rethink your opposition to gun control?"

"No, sir, it will not. Just the opposite, in fact. The lesson of this tragedy is that the streets of our cities are dangerous. And until the police are better able to defend our citizens, I devoutly believe that our citizens must defend themselves."

"Would Christ have given that answer, Mr. Holloway?"

Gravely, he nodded. "Yes, sir, I believe he would have. Christ taught us to turn the other cheek. But he was speaking of turning away insults and petty abuse. With one's life at stake, facing a murderer, I believe Christ would counsel resistance in kind. But please—" He lifted an imploring hand. "Please, I don't feel that I have the strength, now, for debate."

A black woman raised her hand. "You seem to be saying that the police are at fault. Will you prosecute them?"

Gently, he shook his head. "No, madam. I'm not saying that. Not at all. I accuse no one. The police were simply doing their duty. No more. No less."

"Speaking of the police," a young man dressed in a windbreaker said, "there have been persistent rumors that the police department—the Homicide Bureau, in fact—has had the St. Francis under surveillance since Wednesday. There've also been rumors that Homicide investigators have interviewed members of

your staff. Does all that have any connection to last night's murders?"

Holloway shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I'm not aware that anything of that kind happened." Projecting a sudden deep exhaustion, he looked away from the questioner, at the same time signaling surreptitiously to Flournoy, who immediately rose to his feet.

"I think I'm going to intervene," Flournoy said. "Mr. Holloway needs rest. And Mrs. Holloway is waiting for him, in seclusion. I'd like to thank you all for coming here today. I hope we've been able to help you with background to this tragedy. I'd only like to add one thing, if I may—" For emphasis, he paused before he said, "The service we'll be presenting tomorrow will, of course, be in the nature of a memorial service for Elton Holloway." He smiled sadly. "That goes without saying, of course. But I thought someone should say it, nevertheless. Meanwhile—" He raised his hands, in farewell. "Meanwhile, good-bye. We hope to see you tomorrow, at the Cow Palace. And remember, the first two rows are always reserved for the press."

31

"According to what you say about Lloyd Mitchell," Friedman said, "according to how you describe him, there's only one way this could've come down. Someone told him to take Elton out. And that's what he did."

"It could've been Holloway himself that gave the order," Canelli mused. "I mean—" He shook his head. "I mean, as far as I can see, the way they're set up, and everything, it's pretty much what Holloway says that goes. Like he's—you know—a god." As he spoke, he turned to Hastings, questioning the lieutenant with his eyes.

"There's no way we can know, though." Hastings said. "Holloway could be a figurehead, a cardboard man. Flournoy could be pulling the strings. Or Gloria. We just don't know."

"The question is," Friedman said, "what do we do now? What're our options?"

"By five o'clock tomorrow," Hastings said, "they'll all be back in Los Angeles. And there's not a goddamn thing we can do about it, not without warrants. We've got two bodies, and that's it."

"It could be worse," Canelli offered. "After all, there won't be any more hookers killed. At least not by Elton. Mitchell took care of that for us."

Friedman slapped a pudgy hand on his desktop, hard. "I know Holloway put that pipe in Mitchell's hand. I *know* it. And I just plain can't stand the idea of that unctuous, blasphemous bastard getting on an airplane and leaving town. I mean, I *hate* it."

"Jeez, Lieutenant," Canelli said, turning his attention to Friedman. "Jeez, I can't ever remember seeing you so riled up, I don't think."

Friedman studied the other man for a moment before he said, "That's very interesting, Canelli. Because, come to think about it, you're probably right. In this job, you get used to almost anything if you last long enough—everything but the smells, anyhow. But, personally, I always have trouble adjusting to the fact that people can get away with murder. And the fact is, a couple of times the past year or two, we've had fat cats get away with murder in this city. Literally, get away with murder—just because they're rich and famous. Or, anyhow, rich. And it bothers me. It bothers me a lot."

"Maybe you should've been a social worker," Hastings said. "A do-gooder."

"Very funny." Moodily, Friedman began unwrapping a cigar, searching his pockets for matches.

"So what's the plan?" Hastings said.

Friedman lit the cigar, threw the smoking match into his wastebasket, then pointed to the afternoon paper, open on his desk. "According to the *Sentinel*, Holloway is going ahead with the show tomorrow. I don't know about the two of you, but I intend to be there. And afterward, I intend to talk to Austin Holloway. With or without a warrant, I intend to talk to him, let him know I'll be thinking about him—a lot. I want him to start worrying, looking behind him."

"But—" Hesitantly, Canelli cleared his throat. "But they're having their service at the Cow Palace, Lieutenant. And the Cow Palace isn't in San Francisco. It's in Daly City."

"That'll be our little secret, Canelli. However, since you raise the point, and since a low profile is called for here, you're excused." As he spoke, Friedman turned to Hastings. "Well? What do you say? Tomorrow?"

Smiling, Hastings rose to his feet. "It's a date."

32

Five years ago, when they'd taken The Hour to Cincinnati for a week, there'd been a fire in the Bel Air house. Ever since, wherever she went, she carried the small leather photograph album with her. The album was worn, the leather cracked, the pages dog-eared. It had been her daddy's album: he'd kept it in a dresser drawer, beneath his shirts. When she'd been a little girl, she'd sometimes ventured into her daddy's room and taken the album from beneath the shirts. She took the album to her daddy's bed, where the light from the room's single window was good. Very carefully, she would turn the pages—heavy, awkward pages, weighed with the magic of photographs, some of them dimmed with age, pictures of relatives in period clothing, some of them people she'd never seen. But she'd learned their names from her father; she'd memorized their stories. With the album open in her lap, the faces and the stories called to her from across the years: Uncle Fletcher, who'd gone to Alaska to pan for gold. Aunt Ludie, who had never married, and who never seemed to smile; a cousin named Ned, wearing a cowboy hat and chaps, mounted on a horse, looking sternly at the camera.

Of all her daddy's possessions, she'd only kept his watch, and his Bible, and the photograph album. The album had been half filled with pictures when her father had died. Even now, more than thirty years later, the album wasn't full.

Had Austin ever seen the album?

Did he ever go through her things, like she'd gone through her daddy's things, so long ago?

If he'd done it, gone through her things, would he have told her? Would he have wondered why she'd only included pictures of the children, never pictures of him?

Would he have asked her? Would he have cared enough to ask her?

If he had asked her, what would she have answered? How could she have explained that, since the album was really her daddy's, and since her daddy had hated Austin, it would have been wrong for her to—

At the door, a knock sounded. It was five o'clock, then. Five o'clock exactly, time for her bottle.

As she'd taken Elton his bottle of milk, always on time, so Susan, too, was on time. Always. The milk sustained life, the vodka destroyed life. Babies were born, grew into children, who grew into adults—who finally died.

Some died, some were killed. Murdered.

At first, for the first few months of life, the bones of the skull were fragile, unknit. Even the slightest blow could—

Again, Susan's knock. Still softly, still discreetly. But now subtly more insistent. Because, certainly, Susan was concerned for her, worried about her. They were all worried about her. Their voices had softened. Their eyes had changed, dark with sadness, with sympathy.

"Come in, Susan."

Carrying the embroidered satchel with the bottle inside, Susan Gaines opened the door, came gravely into the room, quietly closed the door. Today, for their ritual ceremony, Susan was dressed in black. Her face was somber.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Holloway?"

"I feel lost," she answered. "I feel very lost, very alone."

"Yes—" Susan was nodding. "Is there anything I can do, anything I can get you, besides—" She raised the satchel.

"Where's Austin, do you know?"

"He's with Mr. Flournoy. At least he was, a few minutes ago."

"What about Gloria? Where's Gloria?"

"She's in her suite, with her children. She's left word that she

doesn't want to be disturbed. I mean -" She frowned. "I mean, she doesn't want just anyone to disturb them. I'm sure she'd like to see you, though."

"Do you know where—?" In confusion, she broke off. *Do you know where Elton is?* she wanted to say. But she couldn't say it, not like that, not as if she were asking which hotel room he was in. Because she wanted to know where his body was, where they'd taken him. But she couldn't say it, couldn't say "body" out loud, not to Susan.

Expectantly, Susan stood waiting. Then, as the silence between them lengthened, Susan moved a half step toward the bar. "Shall I—? Would you—?"

"First," Marvella said, "I wish you'd see Gloria. Tell her I'd like to talk to her. Now. Here. Ask her please."

"Then you don't—" Tentatively, Susan raised the satchel again. "You don't want—?"

"Just put it on the bar, there, for now. Don't open it, though. Not now."

"Yes—" To conceal her obvious surprise, Susan Gaines turned away, walked to the bar.

Another knocking, three short, decisive raps of knuckles on wood, unmistakably Gloria. Even now, saddened though she certainly was, Gloria would be assertive, firm, assured.

Gloria had gotten it all, inherited the best, from both of them. Five years later, when Elton was born, the unwanted child of a love long lost, the blood had gone sour, the genes had been corrupted. The baby had grown into a silent, tortured stranger.

"Come in, Gloria."

Gloria, too, was dressed in mourning: a dark blue dress with a small, formal white collar, a dress that a nun could have worn. Were there reporters watching—savages, lurking in the shadows?

"How are you, Mother?" As she asked the question, Gloria's eyes slid involuntarily to the bar. The unopened bottle of vodka stood where Susan had placed it fifteen minutes before. Between Gloria's eyes, a small crease of puzzlement showed.

A line of colorless liquid inside a bottle . . .

For years, for more than half a lifetime, they'd looked at it, looked silently away—looked at her, looked silently away.

But now Gloria's eyes lingered on the bottle, lingered on her. Still silently. Always silently.

"Are you okay?" Gloria came to her, sat beside her on a small love seat, touched her hand. As she looked down at their hands, still touching, she realized that she, too, was dressed in mourning. It was a change, a significant break in her normal routine. Always, at five o'clock, dressed in a flowing hostess gown, hair coiffed, makeup meticulously drawn, she had awaited Susan's discreet knock. The costume had always been part of the ritual. Just as, on Sundays, in front of the cameras, her dress was—

"Mother?" As she said it, Gloria was squeezing her hand. Just as she'd squeezed Gloria's hand when Gloria had been a child and her attention had wandered.

"Yes—" Wearily, she knew, she returned the pressure.

"Are you all right?"

For a moment she didn't reply. As she sat in silence, she realized that she, too, was staring at the bottle of vodka.

Was the bottle still her friend?

Or her enemy now?

She must speak, must ask the question: "Where is he, Gloria? Where's Elton?"

"He's at a funeral home, Mother. Paly's Funeral Home."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, not at—" Gloria broke off, drew a short, agonized breath. "Not at the funeral home."

"You saw him at the morgue."

"I—I had to identify him, this morning."

"I want to see him."

"Mother, I—" Reaching out to grasp her other hand, holding both her hands now, Gloria was looking at her intently, her face anxiously drawn. "I don't think you should see him so soon. I really don't."

"I'd like you to go with me, Gloria. But if you won't, I'll go

alone. I don't want to see him with someone else, with strangers. I want to see him with you. Just with you."

"Let me talk to Dad. Maybe he can—"

"No." Doggedly, vehemently, she shook her head. Repeating: "*No.*"

For a last long, silent moment they sat facing each other, hands clasped, eyes locked. Then, slowly, plainly reluctant, Gloria nodded. "All right. I'll phone down for a car."

Consternation twisted the man's primly pursed mouth, pinched at his nostrils, chilled his eyes.

"The, ah, deceased isn't really ready yet for viewing. We were told—we spoke to Mr. Flournoy, and we agreed—that nine o'clock this evening would be time enough."

Gloria turned to Marvella, took her elbow, guided her to an elaborately carved chair placed beside an elaborately carved table. The air was oppressive, heavy with the cloying fragrance of funereal flowers. A dirge was playing on the speaker system.

When Marvella was seated, Gloria turned abruptly, beckoned for the man in the dark gray double-breasted suit to follow her as she walked into the hallway, out of earshot. She turned, spoke softly, intently:

"What's your name again?"

"Sigler. William Sigler."

"Are you the manager here?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Do you know who I am, who my mother is?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do." He was a tall man, expert at the dolorous role he played. But now, plainly, he was losing his place in the script, running out of lines.

"Have you started to work on my brother's body?"

"Well, ah, yes, ma'am, we have. But it's only six-thirty. And Mr. Flournoy and I agreed that—"

"What I want you to do," she said, "is get him ready for my mother to look at. I saw him at the morgue. I know the condition of his body. And I understand that—" She broke off, bit her lip. "I understand that his head is—damaged. But I want you to get

him ready for my mother to look at. Now. Right now. He doesn't have to be in a casket, and he doesn't have to be dressed. You can drape him, like they did at the morgue. You can drape something over his head, his skull. And you can—"

"Yes, ma'am. I understand what you're saying. But my problem is, you see, that we'll be delayed. And I promised Mr. Flournoy that—"

She stepped close, spoke in a low, furious voice: "Mr. Flournoy works for my father. He's an employee. Do you understand that, Mr. Sigler? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I—ah—"

"The only promise you have to worry about is the promise I made my mother. Do you also understand *that*, Mr. Sigler?"

Slowly, sadly, he nodded, resigned. "Yes, ma'am," he answered. "I understand that."

"In here, ladies . . ." Sigler opened a carved oak door, stepped aside, gestured for them to enter a small, sparsely furnished, dimly lit room that smelled of something thick and sweet. A long table had been placed against the far wall. The table had been draped in black velvet. Except for the face, the body on the table was completely covered with white sheeting.

"I'll be in the office if you need me," Sigler said, speaking to Gloria.

"Thank you, Mr. Sigler. We appreciate this." Gloria waited for her mother to enter the room, then closed the door. They stood side by side for a moment. With her eyes on her son's face, Marvella placed her purse on a nearby chair. Then she stood motionless, hands clasped at her waist, as if she were on stage, waiting her cue to begin singing. Finally, one slow step at a time, she moved close, standing within a few feet of the body.

Until now, she'd never seen it: the similarity between her daddy's face and her son's face. The shape of the forehead and the line of the jaw were the same. And their noses were similar, too, long and flat.

But their eyes had been different. And the eyes were the

windows of the soul, someone had written. Her daddy's eyes had been lively; her son's eyes had been lusterless—dead, before they died.

Standing before her daddy's coffin, staring at the dead face profiled against billows of white satin, she'd felt as empty as she felt now, just as helpless, just as lost.

Both of them, murdered. Both of them with their skulls crushed, lying in their own blood—her father on the path that led across the fields to town, her son lying in an alleyway, a stranger in a strange city.

Standing before her father's casket, dry eyed, she'd felt her life lurch, begin to fall away.

Now, looking down at her son, his body shrouded, she could feel her life ending. Finally, mercifully ending, leaving only the final riddle of death to be solved.

"It was Mitchell," she said. "I know it was Mitchell."

Standing in the shadows, a witness as well as a victim, Gloria tried to speak, tried to deny it.

33

Standing in the corridor across from the elevators, the security man came to attention as the elevator stopped, the doors opened, and Gloria and Marvella stepped out. Nodding to the security man, Gloria moved with her mother to the door of Marvella's room.

"I want to spend some time with the children, Mother, then put them to bed. Are you all right?"

Marvella nodded. "Yes, Gloria. Thank you."

"I'll tell Susan to sit with you. Are you ready for tomorrow, for The Hour? Is your dress ready? A dark dress?"

"Susan's got it ready. She always does, you know. She's very efficient. Always very efficient." She spoke in a low, uninflected voice. Her eyes were far away.

"After I've put the children to bed I'll look in on you. Shall I?" As she spoke, Gloria tried Marvella's door. The knob turned; the door swung partially open.

"Where's Austin?" Marvella asked. "Do you know?"

"He's with Herbert, I think, in the conference room. Harlan Collins is with them."

"The lawyer?"

Gloria nodded. "Yes."

"But it's too late for lawyers—too late for everything."

Facing Marvella, Gloria looked intently into her mother's eyes. Should she call the doctor who'd been summoned from Los Angeles, her father's personal doctor? Should she demand that her mother be sedated? Or would she sedate herself with vodka,

as she did every night? Gloria touched her mother on the forearm, ventured a smile, pushed the door open wider. "Let's go inside, Mother. I'll call Susan. You should lie down, rest. I think I'll call Dr. Piernan."

As she entered her sitting room, Marvella shook her head, sighed, sank onto the chaise longue, put her handbag on the floor. "No, don't call the doctor. I don't need a doctor."

"Then I'll call Susan." Still with her eyes on her mother's face, searching for clues, she moved to the phone. "What's her room number?

"I don't want Susan, Gloria." As she said it, she allowed her eyes to close, allowed her head to sink back against the chaise. "I don't want to see anyone but Austin."

"I'll tell him, then. I'll tell him you want to see him."

"No—" Slowly, as if the movement caused her pain, Marvella shook her head. "No, don't tell him."

"Mother, I—I hate to leave you. But the children, they're upset. I've got to see how they are."

"I'm all right, Gloria. Now that I've seen Elton, I'll be all right. Thank you for going with me. It was hard for you, I know." She spoke without opening her eyes, still lying motionless. In exhausted repose, with sunken eyes and mouth gone slack, the musculature of her face had shrunken on the bones beneath: a death's-head, its beauty distended by despair.

"I'll come back after I've put the children to bed."

"Yes . . ."

For a moment Gloria stood in silence beside the chaise. Then she bent over her mother, kissed her lightly on the forehead. The acknowledgment was a soft, sleepy sigh, nothing more. Gloria straightened, stood irresolutely for a moment before she went to the door. With her hand on the knob, she looked at the bar. The bottle of vodka was still unopened, its seal intact, its clear liquid reflecting the mirrored surfaces of the small bar. In the quiet room, the bottle was the third presence, the ultimate enigma.

As the door clicked closed, Marvella opened her eyes. Her gaze was on the bar, on the bottle.

Four steps, and a twist of the top, to break the seal. The ice cubes were in the tiny refrigerator, together with the tonic water and the limes. Or, if she chose, she could eliminate the tonic, and instead pour the vodka over the ice, and add a dash of bitters. She would return to the chaise, stretch out, lift the crystal glass to her lips, take the first swallow. Instantly, with that first swallow, the world beyond the room would begin to soften. The pain of the past would subside; only pleasurable memories would remain, suffusing her, bearing her back to those days of sunlight, those nights of limpid expectation, of forbidden ecstasy. Until finally sensation ceased, setting her free.

But what of the body beneath the shroud?

What of her father's body, long ago returned to dust?

What of their shattered skulls? Could vodka liberate her from the phantasms that followed upon these images, these terrible, terrible memories?

They were dead, the two of them. Liberated, finally free, all sensation ceased, all torture stilled. *Praise the Lord*, Austin would intone tomorrow. And the echoes would come back: *Praise the Lord*.

They were free, but she was still enslaved, still his prisoner. Until now, her nightly bottle of vodka had been enough to numb the pain.

Until now, but no longer.

If only death had liberated her father, and only death had liberated her son, then only death would liberate her, finally set her free, really free.

Amen.

Outside, in the corridor, one of the security men looked at her expectantly. His eyes were sympathetically solicitous, his voice soft: "Can I help you, Mrs. Holloway?"

"Yes. I've got to get into my husband's suite, to get some things. He's not there. Do you have a passkey?"

"I—ah—" Consternation shadowed his eyes, puckered his forehead. She knew what he was thinking, could calculate his

dilemma. He needed Mitchell's approval to open Austin's door, even to her. And Mitchell was dead.

"*Do* you have a key?"

Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded. She nodded in return, then began walking toward her husband's door. Behind her, the security man's footsteps obediently followed. She heard the jingle of his keys, coming free from his pocket.

Would he be blamed for what would happen, this nice young man with the sympathetic eyes, whose name she could never remember? She hoped not.

Yes, it was there, as deadly as a snake: a blue-steeled snake, concealed beneath the socks and underwear. God, how she hated them, feared the guns they kept, both her father and her husband.

Until now, she'd hated them. Until this very moment, when the cold steel pressed to her belly beneath her blouse produced an obscenely erotic thrill, a long-forgotten rush of forbidden excitement.

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"What we should do tonight," Ann said, "is go out for dinner and then see a movie." Seated beside Hastings on their living room sofa, she leaned forward, took a copy of the *Sentinel* from the coffee table, opened it to the entertainment section. "You have no idea how much good it'll do you, to see a movie."

Hastings sighed, then nodded. "Fine." He kept his gaze straight ahead, focused somewhere just beyond the room's far wall. With the newspaper on her lap, Ann let a long moment of silence pass as she looked at him.

"And over dinner," she said finally, "you should tell me about it. Just this once. I know how you feel about bringing worries home from the office. But rules are meant to be broken. It's a cliché, but it's true. We should—"

In the hallway, the phone rang.

"Shall I get it?" she asked.

Sighing again, Hastings rose, shaking his head. She watched him as he walked into the hallway. From the first, the first time they went out together for an Italian dinner in North Beach, she'd always liked to watch him move: gracefully, economically, confidently, quietly purposeful. And the movements, she'd later discovered, summarized the man. He was a quiet, purposeful man, more self-confident than most men his age and status, even though his early life had been difficult. Sometimes they talked about it: the ones he'd won, the ones he'd lost. "Some of us get blindsided," he'd once said. "I guess that's what happened to me when I was a teenager."

In the hallway, she heard him quietly talking on the phone. From the sound of his voice, from its cadence, she knew he was talking to Friedman.

Blindsided . . .

"When you think about it," her father had once remarked, "you can sum up most people's lives in a hundred words or less, just like you were entering a boxtop contest."

And Frank had once said something similar, telling her about his own life. He'd always been big for his age, and well coordinated. And that, he'd said, pretty much summed him up. Because athletics—football, especially—had been his whole life. Until one Sunday afternoon in Detroit when a defensive tackle had clipped him. The other team had been penalized—and he'd gone to the hospital with a ruined knee.

He'd grown up in the "middle of the middle class." His father had been a small-time real-estate broker who ran off with his "girl Friday." Frank had been fourteen, and had just made the freshman football team at San Francisco's Washington High. He'd come home from practice to find his mother sitting at the kitchen table, crying, clutching the note his father had left propped on the refrigerator.

The week after Frank had been elected captain of the varsity football team, his father and his "girl Friday" had been killed in west Texas. It had been a one-car accident, in the wee hours. His father had been drunk, and had been three payments behind on the five-year-old Packard he'd been driving. When he heard about the accident, Frank had gone to his room, locked the door, and tried to cry.

When he'd told Ann about it, she'd heard his voice thicken, seen his eyes glistening. And somehow she'd known that he'd never told anyone about it, about trying to cry when he'd heard his father had been killed.

From the hallway, she heard his voice rising. Invariably, at some point in any conversation with Pete Friedman, his voice rose, an expression of that particular level of exasperation with which he expressed his essential fondess for Friedman. Women

hugged each other. Men punched each other on the arm. Pete teased Frank, who obligingly bristled.

From high school, he'd gone to Stanford, on a football scholarship. For Frank, the amiable clichés of the campus football hero hadn't come true. His yardage-gained statistics were impressive, but he'd never been at ease among the sons and daughters of the rich, probably because he hadn't been at ease with himself. His mother, during those years, had sold better dresses at Sears. And Frank had always—

In the hallway, the sound of his voice had ceased; the phone rattled in its cradle. As he came into the living room, he was smiling: a small, quizzical smile.

"If you think I'm suffering because of this Holloway thing," he said, "you should talk to Pete. I've been working with him for twelve years. And I've never seen him so upset."

"Upset? *Pete?*"

"Hard to believe, I know." The smile widened and warmed as he sat beside her, moved closer. With their thighs touching, she felt a sexual quickening. And—yes—he felt it, too. His left arm was around her shoulders, drawing her to him. She turned, looked at him, smiled, then kissed him: a thoughtful, contented, companionable kiss. Answering, his mouth was open, inviting, exploring. His breathing was faster now. His right hand came to the small of her back, urging her body into full contact with his, both of them twisted on the couch. This was the beginning of the jokes passion could play: this straining together, half on the couch and half off, reclining but not reclining, both of them aroused: two awkward, inarticulate teenagers, making out on the living room sofa.

So, together, they drew back, smiling into each other's eyes, both of them breathing deeply.

"Where're the kids?" he asked.

"Dan's out on a date. And Billy's with his father for the weekend."

"Then what would you think about me taking you into the bedroom?"

"No dinner? No movie?"

"The late show, maybe."

"Hmmm . . ."

Lying on his back, staring up at the bedroom ceiling, Hastings drew a deep, drowsy breath. At ten o'clock on a warm September evening, with Ann sleeping contentedly beside him, the world was better than it had been only a few hours ago. Whatever else sex accomplished, the simple act of orgasm was a quick, effective means of reducing tensions, inducing sleep, putting the day into better perspective.

Sex, someone had once said, was much like money: when you didn't have enough, you thought about it all the time. But when you were married the problem diminished, ideally disappeared. Like tonight. A touch of their thighs, a kiss, and they were on their way to the bedroom, amiably stumbling as they held each other close, giggling.

Married . . .

That's how he thought of it, that they were married. Did Ann, too, think of them that way? They'd never talked about it, might never talk about it. Each of them had been divorced. Each of them had two children, his in Detroit, hers here, living with her. Each of them had been deeply wounded by divorce. They'd never talked about that, either. Not in so many words. But each knew that the other wasn't ready to marry again.

They'd met a little less than two years ago. On their second date, after dinner at a Russian restaurant on Clement Street, she'd invited him in for a drink. They'd gone to bed that night, made love in the same bed they shared now. Billy and Dan, her two sons, had been visiting their grandparents. He'd stayed all night, and she'd made him breakfast the next morning. The rest had been a love story: a calm, comfortable love story that sometimes seemed too good to be true.

Then he'd made the mistake of turning his back on a spaced-out cultist who'd been standing within reach of two ceremonial Mayan spears crossed on the wall. The skull fracture had put Hastings in the hospital for ten days. Ann had picked him up at

the hospital and taken him here, to her flat, to convalesce. Two months later, he'd given up his apartment.

He yawned, settled himself more comfortably, turned on his side to face Ann. She was lying on her back, mouth slightly open, profiled against the pale light from the window. Her fine-spun tawny blonde hair lay across her cheek, diffusing the perfection of her profile. Gently, he touched her at the temple, drawing the hair back from her face. When she stirred, he smiled.

35

With Holloway inside the first limousine, Flournoy stood on the sidewalk, looking back at the other two limos drawn up in front of the St. Francis. Marvella and the grandchildren were already inside the second limo, finally settled. Now Gloria was striding briskly across the sidewalk, getting into the car, pulling the door smartly closed. The third limo, carrying the security men, the program director, and Pastor Bob, The Hour's longtime featured soloist, was ready to go. Flournoy nodded to the two security men standing watchfully on the sidewalk, and got into the limousine beside Holloway. One of the security men stepped quickly forward, closed the door, then slapped the car's roof twice. As the limousine moved away from the curb, Flournoy checked his watch. The time was exactly eleven A.M., two hours to air time.

Flournoy settled heavily into the limo's leather seat, glanced at the window dividing the passenger compartment from the driver, checked the switch on the small microphone.

"I've talked to Harlan," Flournoy said, half turned in his seat to face Holloway, "and he agrees with me, absolutely. So after the service, you and Marvella are going directly to the airport. It's all arranged. You'll be going in a chartered airplane. Hennessy will be going with you. He's got all the details, and your light luggage. The point is, day after tomorrow, there's a coroner's inquest. And Harlan thinks it'd be better if you're not here in San Francisco, in part because you could be subpoenaed. He also

thinks it'd be better if you, ah, avoid the reporters. I think so, too. Definitely."

Sitting with his head resting against the cushions, eyes closed, Holloway made no response. His head moved loosely, surrendered to the gentle motion of the limousine. The flesh of his face was waxen, sagging in loose folds beneath his jowls.

Only minutes before, projecting his public persona for the news cameramen waiting for him in the hotel lobby, Holloway had been masterful: the strong, saddened patriarch, majestically bearing his burden, an inspiration to lesser men. That was the myth, those few minutes on camera. This, Flournoy realized, was reality: this tired, slack man, suddenly grown old.

"Austin?"

Still with his eyes closed, Holloway nodded. "Yes. Fine. Whatever Harlan says."

Relieved, Flournoy settled himself more comfortably. The ride to the Cow Palace would take about twenty minutes. It was valuable time, the two of them alone, able to speak freely, confidentially, concisely:

"I'll come down to Los Angeles tomorrow, if I can possibly do it," Flournoy said. "Gloria will handle all the funeral arrangements. She'll come down to Los Angeles with the—" He hesitated. "With the bodies."

"Yes . . ."

"Did Mitchell have any relatives, do you know?"

"No close relatives," Holloway answered. "There was just an older brother. But he died several years ago."

"We don't want them buried with the same ceremony," Flournoy said. "That wouldn't be appropriate."

"No, it wouldn't. You're right. But Mitchell's ceremony must be first-class. Absolutely first-class. And I plan to speak."

"Will you speak at Elton's service?"

"No, not at Elton's. That's not done, I don't think."

Approvingly, Flournoy nodded. "You're right."

"I'll speak for Elton today."

"Yes . . ." Flournoy cleared his throat, touched the knot of

his tie, glanced again at the glass partition. Then: "I—ah—I'm concerned about Marvella, Austin. She's not acting normally."

"She's had a shock. We've all had a shock." As he spoke, Holloway opened his eyes, sat up straighter, looked at the other man.

"But that's the point. I mean—" Flournoy hesitated, choosing his words. "I mean, let's face it, Marvella's been drinking for years. It—it's part of her daily routine. But last night, according to Susan, she didn't drink a drop. And she went to see—" Once more he hesitated, this time delicately, regretfully. "She went to see Elton, at the mortuary. Without consulting anyone except Gloria. And today, this morning, she seems to be off in her own world. She's not connecting."

"Susan will take care of her. And Gloria, too. They'll take care of her."

Flournoy nodded. "I understand that. And you're right, of course. She *has* had a shock. But I was thinking about today, about The Hour. Maybe you should tell her not to appear today. The people will understand. It could even be a plus, when you think about it."

"She wants to appear, though. She told Gloria that she particularly wants to appear, to sing."

"Have you talked to Marvella yourself?"

Holloway nodded. "I spoke to her last night, late. And this morning, too."

"And?"

"She'll be all right, Herbert. Trust me."

Seated side by side on the two jump seats, their favorite places, the two children faced Marvella and Gloria.

"How long does it take to go to heaven?" James asked. "If Elton and Mitchell started on Friday night, then how long would it take them to get there?"

"Not long," Gloria answered. "It just takes a little while."

"But how *long*? Fifteen minutes?"

"I suppose so," Gloria answered. "I suppose it'd take about fifteen minutes."

"I miss Mitchell more than I miss Elton," Carole said. "Elton never played with us, even if he was our uncle. But Mitchell played with us sometimes."

"Once he let me hold his gun. And I pulled the trigger, too." As he spoke, James raised a thumb and straightened forefinger, aimed out the window. "Pow. Pow pow pow." With each shot, he jerked his arm upward, simulating a pistol's recoil.

"James, please . . ." Gloria shook her head. "Don't do that. Not now." As she spoke, she turned to look at Marvella, who was staring steadily out the window, her eyes fixed on the western profile of the city: Twin Peaks, with countless houses and small apartment buildings clinging precariously to the lower slopes, and greenery tracing the topmost ridges against a clear blue sky.

"It's a beautiful city," Marvella said. "It's magic, really. Pure magic." Her voice was dreamily soft. Her eyes were fixed on some far distant vista, bemused, lost in time past or time future. "You should live here, Gloria, you and the children. You'd like it here. I know you would."

"We've got to live in Los Angeles, though. Because of The Hour."

"The Hour . . ." Still gazing pensively out the side window, Marvella gently shook her head. "It's more important than we are, Gloria. Soon it'll be more important than James and Carole. Maybe it's more important than they are already." She turned to face the children, looking at each of them in turn. "You shouldn't be here, in this big car, all dressed up. You shouldn't be onstage, singing. You don't even know what the hymns mean, most of them. Do you?"

Frowning, the two children exchanged puzzled looks. Gloria was about to speak when Marvella said, "You should be out playing with friends. It's a nice, sunny day. You should be playing."

"Mother, they—"

Ignoring the gentle interruption, her eyes unfocused now, Marvella said, "It was the same with me. My father was a preacher, you know. And Austin's father, too. He was a preacher. So I know what it's like, how it feels, not to be like other

children. And your mother, too—she knows how it feels. Except that, by the time your mother was your age, her father was famous—or, anyhow, getting famous. That was in the fifties, when television was just starting out. Austin had been on radio, you see—and when he got a chance at television, he took it. And that's when he changed, when he started to change. Or maybe . . ." Frowning, she shook her head, puzzled by a sudden thought. "Or maybe he didn't change. Maybe he was always the way he was, and I just never saw it, until the money started to come in. Because that's all he cared about, then—the money. He was possessed by it, all that money. But now it's something more, besides the money. Now it's the power he's got over people. He'll do anything to keep that power. Anything at all . . ." Her voice faded as her eyes wandered again to the window. In the silence, Gloria saw her children look at each other, then turn to look at their grandmother, solemnly studying her.

"He sold his soul to the Devil," Marvella said. "He made a pact with the Devil. And we're part of it, too—we're all part of it. Because he sold our souls, too, along with his." She broke off, numbly shook her head, struggled to find the words she needed to finish the thought: "And that's why Elton died Friday night." As she spoke, she moved closer to the door, away from the others. Shoulders hunched, head bowed, forehead pressed forlornly against the window, she was withdrawing from them. In her lap she held her purse. She held the purse with both hands, clutching it close, as a child clutches a long-favored possession, for security.

"Let's sit down in front," Friedman said, pointing. "The only empty seats're in the first two rows."

"They're reserved." Hastings pointed to a small PRESS ONLY sign.

Mock-dolefully, Friedman shook his head. "There're badge flashers in this business, and there're non-badge-flashers. And you're just about the most dedicated non-badge-flasher I ever knew, honest to God." Impatiently, he gestured Hastings into the second row, with three empty seats close by. Shaking his head and raising a protesting hand, a tall young man in a blue blazer

was coming down the aisle toward them. Friedman waited for the usher to come close before he surreptitiously produced his badge.

"Police," he said. "City police. We're working with your security people."

"But—" Worriedly, the clean-cut young usher shook his head. "But this is the press section."

"Exactly. That's where we're supposed to be sitting." He turned his back on the usher, and followed Hastings, who was already seated, eyes front, ignoring Friedman. As Friedman sat down beside him, Hastings said sotto voce, "'City police'?"

"I couldn't very well have said 'San Francisco,' could I? And if I'd said 'Daly City,' why, that would've been a lie."

"Good thinking."

"Thanks."

Twisting in his seat, Hastings scanned the audience, all of them seated in the first tier of seats, facing a stage that had been erected close to the front row. A blue curtain divided the cavernous Cow Palace down the center, with the stage backed against the curtain. High above the stage, lights and loudspeakers hung from the enormous curved steel girders that made the Cow Palace one of the largest clear-span buildings in the world. The stage was draped in rich golden cloth, iridescent in the amber glow of floodlights. Except for a plain wooden pulpit and a set of risers for the choir, the stage was deserted. Between the stage and the front row of seats, separated by a steel railing, music stands and empty chairs were arranged in a semicircle around a large organ. Like the draperies, the organ was an iridescent gold.

"There must be twenty thousand people here," Hastings said. "And they're still coming in."

"I keep telling you, TV evangelism is big business."

"Will they pass collection plates, do you think?"

Friedman shrugged. "If they do, it'll probably be just for appearance. The real money comes from the telephone number they run at the bottom of the TV screen."

"So what's the plan?"

"We're going to talk to Holloway. One way or the other, after he finishes, we're going to talk to him."

"We're going to sweat a confession from him. In Daly City. Is that why we're here?"

"We're here," Friedman answered, "because, as Canelli observed, Holloway rings all my bells. And that was before his tame gorilla killed his crazy son, the mass murderer."

"Serial murderer," Hastings corrected automatically.

"You're pretty blasé about all this, considering that it was you Mitchell was shooting at."

"He missed."

"You're getting to an age when you should start to think about staying out of dark alleys," Friedman said. "That's what the chain of command is all about, you know. We devise the strategy, and the rank-and-filers take the risks. We get paid for— Ah." He interrupted himself as a richly robed man rounded the corner of the stage and made his way gravely toward the organ, his head bowed over clasped hands, moving one slow, measured step at a time. "Ah—the show's about to begin."

"Okay, folks, everyone ready?" As he'd done so often before, the assistant director grinned at them: a genial coach, guiding them through these last few seconds before they fixed their smiles in place and stepped through the parted curtains into the heart-racing glare of the spotlights, with the pale ovals of countless anonymous faces upturned in the half-light beyond.

This was the mummer's moment of magic, this addictive rush of anxious anticipation, waiting protected in the backstage semidarkness for the final cue that would send them out to face their performer's fate.

On the other side of the curtain, the last strains of "Nearer My God to Thee" were rising, holding, finally fading to silence. The applause began, rose, crested, held—and finally trickled down to silence. Now Holloway was speaking, softly at first, gathering the audience to him, working them gently, lovingly, expertly. At the curtain, with his hand resting lightly on the fold beside the parting, the assistant director stood poised, ready. His face had gone blank now, his attention centered on the small earphone that

connected him to the control booth suspended high above them, on the far side of the curtain.

But now, with the cue coming up, the assistant director's automatic, sustaining smile flickered, suddenly faded. Anxiously, he stepped close to Marvella, urgently whispering, "You've got your purse, Mrs. Holloway. Give it to me. I'll keep it for you."

Slowly, gently, she shook her head. "No. I want it with me today." As she spoke, dreamily decisive, Holloway's voice was falling on cadence, concluding. Their cue was only moments away.

"But—" The assistant director looked at Marvella, looked down at the purse, looked appealingly at Gloria. She shrugged, turned away. Now the assistant director looked anxiously at the curtain. Then, peevishly resigned, he stepped to the curtain, nodded to a watchfully waiting stagehand. The two men grasped the heavy curtain, drew it aside. Onstage, at the pulpit, precisely on cue, Holloway turned to face them as they came through the parted curtain: first Marvella, then Gloria, finally the two children. Following Marvella with his eyes as she walked to the spot the director had marked in rehearsal, Holloway raised his arms wide, in loving salute. He was smiling: a patriarch's sad, grieving smile, consummately projected. A long, sympathetic round of applause had swept the audience as the curtains parted. But then, as he held the pose, still facing his family, still solemnly smiling upon them, waiting for the applause to die, Holloway realized that his smile-for-the-cameras was jeopardized by an involuntary frown as he saw the purse Marvella carried, clutched close in both hands.

She's not acting normally, Flournoy had said.

As always, Flournoy had been right. Ominously right. Because her face was rigid, a stranger's face, staring at him with a stranger's eyes.

But, with the applause fading, he must turn to face the audience, a helpless victim of the performer's imperative to constantly fill a void. As always, he would make a short speech, followed by the introduction of the "Holloway family hymn." Backed up by the choir, the family would sing as the cameras

came in close on their faces, especially the children's faces, as they stood holding to their mother's hands, earnestly singing. Then, with the hymn finished, the choir would file offstage. After a few loving words from Holloway, usually followed by a fond caress for each of the children, the family would follow the choir, leaving Holloway to deliver the day's sermon.

Today, facing the audience, Holloway allowed a long moment of silence to lengthen to its outermost limits as he looked out over the thousands of faces, most of them upturned: the faithful, patiently waiting—and the unfaithful, too, also waiting.

"Most of you," he began, "are familiar with the format of this weekly service. Most of you, thanks be to the Lord—" He raised his eyes to near camera level, smoothly transitioning from the in-house audience to the TV audience. "—most of you invite us regularly into your homes on Sundays so that we can worship together, giving thanks for this wonder of television, God's own miracle, that enables us to spend this precious hour together each week.

"Most of you, as I say, are familiar with our routine, with our way of doing things. We've become predictable—comfortingly, reassuringly predictable, the way members of a family, one vast God-fearing family, become predictable to one another. Oh, yes—" Tolerantly smiling, he nodded. "Oh, yes, some will say, I suppose, that it's dull, knowing what's about to be said, knowing exactly what comes next. But I don't think it's dull, my friends. I think it's wonderful, being that close. I think—I'm sure, absolutely sure—that God meant us to live like this, in close communion with one another. I think God wants us—commands us—to live like that. However—" He broke off, lowered his eyes to the pulpit, sadly shook his silvery head.

"However, as it does in all families, there sometimes come breaks in these routines, in these reassuring rhythms of life. And that's what happened just this last week, to our family—" As he spoke, he turned toward his wife and daughter and grandchildren, all of them standing at their designated places, ten feet from him. The children, he saw, were beginning to fidget. But Gloria was

controlling them, her hands knuckle-white. As always, he could count on Gloria.

"And if I may—" He turned again toward the cameras. "If I may, I'd like to tell you what happened to us—what tragedy befell our family on Friday night. It—it won't be easy, telling you. I may stumble. But if you'll bear with me—if you'll pray with me to find the words—I'd like to tell you what happened on Friday night."

Once more standing with his eyes lowered, gripping the lectern with both hands, as if for support, he could sense a welling up of sympathy from beyond the glare of the footlights. He'd been right about this—about the wisdom of coming to this audience, in this city, with this sermon. Because, in spite of themselves, despite all their degenerate sophistication, they were with him, these San Franciscans. Today—now—here—their hearts were with him.

He raised his eyes, let the silence lengthen as he looked out over the audience. When he finally spoke, he allowed his voice to thicken, allowed his eyes to mist, suggesting tears.

"Every family has its mavericks, its stubborn, willful sons. And Elton was the maverick in our family. He wanted his own ministry, distinct from my ministry—just as I wanted my ministry, distinct from my father's. That's human nature, part of every son's rite of passage. In the nature of things, the old among us must give way to the young.

"And so it was that Elton established his own ministry. He established it among the poor, and the downtrodden, and the disheartened. He went out among them, sought out the misfits and outcasts, followed them down their mean streets and dark, dangerous alleyways, doing his best to help them, pray with them, save them for Christ. While the rest of us remained at our ease, safe and secure, doing God's work, Elton was risking his life, night after night, seeking out sin at its source, praying with the robbers and the rapists and, yes, even the prostitutes among us, doing his eternal best to save them.

"And so it was, dear friends, that Elton was walking the dark, dangerous streets of the district San Franciscans call the Tender-

loin, on Friday night. We'll—" He broke off, dropped his eyes, cleared his throat, blinked—then raised his head heavily, to look full into the camera. "We'll never know what happened, really happened, Friday night. There'll never be proof, not the kind of proof that would convince a judge or a jury. And yet I know precisely what happened. I know that, while Elton was at work, imploring some poor, benighted sinner to take Christ for his saviour, another sinner attacked Elton, and killed him, and took the few dollars Elton carried with him. And so—" Struggling for control, he broke off. Then, huskily: "And so, that anonymous sinner took Elton from us, Friday night.

"And so this service, today, is dedicated to Elton. And I hope you'll join with me in prayer for the soul of one dearly beloved servant of Christ, who died as he lived, saving souls for God." He closed his eyes, bowed his head, dropped his voice to its lowest, most solemn register as he began the prayer.

"Jesus Christ," Friedman muttered, both outraged and awed, "Talk about chutzpah. Talk about the ultimate blasphemy. Talk about the goddamn big lie, this guy's—"

"*Shhh.*" Uneasily, Hastings ignored a hostile stare from the woman seated on his right.

"What 'shhh'? Jesus, it's your hide this guy could nail to the barn. Your hide and Canelli's hide. He gets down to Los Angeles, he's going to call another press conference. He's going to accuse you guys, sure as hell, of killing Mitchell without cause. This time next week, you could be up on charges. Both of you."

Watching Holloway finish the prayer, caught up in spite of himself by the sonorous phrases, Hastings made no reply.

In the control booth suspended high above the audience, Flournoy flicked the switch that silenced his microphone. Softly, incredulously, he spoke to the director, who sat intently before the three camera monitors. The director's fingers hovered delicately above the toggles that cut between the three live cameras.

"He's doing it," Flournoy said. "He's never been better.

Never." Marveling, he shook his head. "Incredible. Really incredible."

"And now—" Holloway turned to face his family. "Now—without Elton—my family will observe the most meaningful part of this hour we spend with you, joining together to sing today's featured hymn. Because of the tragedy that's touched our lives, they've chosen "Come to the Church in the Wildwood," which was Elton's favorite hymn from the time he was just a—" He broke off, blinked, cleared his throat, finally finished: "—just a little boy."

As the organ led into the hymn and the overhead microphones began lowering on their cords before them, Gloria squeezed her children's hands, then released them, signifying that, in moments, the cameras would be on them, and they must begin singing with her. But, with the organ introduction almost completed and the microphones fully lowered, Gloria saw sudden puzzlement register on her father's face. Following the disapproving direction of his gaze, she saw her mother stepping forward, leaving her mark, moving toward the pulpit. As Marvella advanced, one slow, stiff, dreamwalker's step at a time, Holloway's puzzled expression changed to vexation, then to mild alarm. With his back to the cameras, urgently, he looked to Gloria for some sign, some explanation. In moments, the organ introduction would be finished, and they must begin singing. But now Marvella was within arm's length of the lectern. With her eyes on the audience, she was smiling slightly, ethereally, the way she always smiled just before she began singing. Mindful that one of the three cameras could see him as he turned to face her, Holloway extended both hands, as if to welcome her to stand beside him at the pulpit. Marvella put her handbag on the pulpit beside Holloway's Bible and reached for the microphone, bending the flexible shaft to suit her height. Moving one step aside, Holloway looked at the organist, covertly shook his head. Smoothly, the organist softened his sound, allowed the strains of "Come to the Church in the Wildwood" to slowly fade into

silence. Looking out across the audience with empty eyes, Marvella timidly cleared her throat, nervously licked her lips.

Pushing his lightweight Lucite headset down around his neck, Flournoy leaned intently forward. Frowning, he glanced at the three monitors. Of course, the red light glowed beneath the monitor that focused on Holloway and Marvella, standing at the lectern. Simultaneously, Flournoy and the director exchanged wary, puzzled glances before both men returned their eyes to the monitors. Nervously, the director advanced the volume control as Marvella's voice began coming over the loudspeaker.

"There are about five hundred people," Marvella said, "who work for my husband. That's how many people it takes to put on The Hour, and do the direct mailings, and then handle the other mail, and all those checks. And there's the Temple of Light, too, in Los Angeles. It takes a lot of people just to clean it, and change the light bulbs. And all that's not even counting the college. That's another few hundred people right there, in the college.

"But when I first met my husband, there was just one person working for him—not really working for him, even, because a lot of the time Austin didn't have enough money to pay him, or have anything for him to do, not really. But they were together, Austin and Lloyd—Lloyd Mitchell, his name was. And they were bound together, he and Austin, bound fast together. Because when Lloyd was a young man, and just married, he found his wife with another man. And he killed them. Both of them, right in the bedroom. He slaughtered them, some said, like cattle. And then he went to the sheriff, and surrendered himself. And he went to prison. For years, he was in prison."

"What the hell?" Flournoy muttered. "What's she *doing*?"

"But then," Marvella was saying, "they let him out of prison, paroled to Austin, as long as his behavior was good. So Lloyd became the first person that Austin ever owned. He—"

"*Marvella*—" Angrily, involuntarily, Holloway stepped quick-

ly toward her. But then he heard the single word "Marvella" echo and reecho, and he realized the microphone was still live. And beside the camera lenses, tiny red lights still glowed. Desperately, he stepped back, looked at Gloria, who still stood motionless, holding her children tightly by their hands. Gloria's expression was blank, utterly blank. She couldn't help him—or wouldn't help him. Now he turned toward the part in the curtain, where the assistant director should be showing himself—the assistant director, Flournoy, someone should be there, someone to assume command, someone to come onstage, take Marvella by the arm, lead her gently, firmly away, let him recover the microphone and the cameras. Then, with a single gesture, a single sad, sympathetic phrase, he could suggest that the loss of her child had deranged Marvella, made her—

"Austin came to the town where my daddy preached," she was saying, still staring blankly straight ahead, out over the audience, "and Austin made a deal with my daddy, to share the church, share expenses, he said. My daddy never liked Austin, never trusted him, really. But Daddy needed the money, so he did it, made the deal. And for a while, it worked fine. Because, even then, Austin was a good preacher—" For the first time, she took her eyes from the audience, turned to Holloway, stood silently staring at him. Her face was still expressionless, her eyes still utterly empty.

"Maybe it'll be okay," the director was saying. "It could be okay. It could play."

"A *good* preacher," she repeated, still facing Holloway. She spoke very softly, her voice hardly more than a whisper. But she was close enough to the microphone, Holloway knew, for her words to be broadcast, nationwide, over more than two hundred TV affiliates, live.

Live.

Meeting her eyes, he tried to smile. His expression, he knew, must be charitable, must be loving. Because this was the mother of the son he was eulogizing. Until the cameras went blind and

the microphone at the pulpit went dead, he must keep his eyes fixed kindly, lovingly upon his wife, must keep the smile in place. Covertly, he glanced at the tiny red light still glowing beside the camera. Meaning that, taking a calculated risk, Flournoy had decided to let the show run, let the camera roll. Because there was a chance—a good percentage chance, probably—that her monologue, poignantly portraying a mother's grief, would play, live, the way a sermon could never play. And Flournoy was a percentage player.

But Flournoy didn't know what he knew—what he and Mitchell, only the two of them, knew.

"I suppose," she was saying, finally turning back to face the audience, "that I fell in love with him, with Austin, because he was so much like his daddy. I've thought about it a good deal, these last two days, and that's what I've decided. I was only sixteen when Austin came to town. But I was an old sixteen, and the boys in town didn't interest me anymore. I was ready for a man. And Austin was ready, too—ready for me, just like I was ready for him."

"From the expression on Holloway's face," Friedman whispered, "it doesn't look like this is in the script."

"He's trying to look sad," Hastings whispered. "But he's looking sick instead."

"Hallelujah."

". . . saw each other in town, at his hotel. So, of course, everyone in town knew, or at least suspected—which is the same as knowing in that town. But I didn't care. I was in love, really in love, for the first time. And, besides, Austin had promised to take me with him when he left town.

"But then my daddy found out. And he came to Austin's hotel room, and he found us in bed together."

"Jesus *Christ*." Flournoy gestured furiously. "Cut the mike at the pulpit. Keep the camera on them, but cut the sound."

Instantly, the loudspeaker in the control booth went dead.

"Get the choir singing. *Quick.*"

Obeying, the director spoke into his microphone. Onstage, the curtain flicked. Pastor Bob's eyes moved to the parted curtain. Then Pastor Bob turned to the choir, said something, raised his hand.

"Come in on Austin's face," Flournoy snapped. "His expression, it's good. Hold on it, with the choir singing."

"Right." On the control console, toggles were flicked, tiny lights came on and off.

"And Daddy went crazy. He just went crazy. It was like his sermons on hellfire and damnation, everything he ever preached, had all come together. It was at night, I remember, a Thursday night. And he stood before us, and called down the wrath of God on us, and damned us for all eternity. And then he said he was going to take me home, and lay his belt to me, and then lock me in a closet. And then he was going to go to the sheriff, he said, and swear out a complaint against Austin for rape. And on Sunday, from the pulpit, he would do it again, damn Austin for eternity. And he would damn me, too, for a fallen woman.

"And that's what he did. He took me home, dragged me home, really, like he did when I was little, and he was going to whip me. He dragged me home, and he made me lean over the dining room table, just like he always used to do, and he whipped me. And between every stroke, he'd call up to God, and recite from the Bible, too—whichever verse fitted. And then he locked me in the hall closet, just like he said he would, and he set off to find the sheriff. I don't know why he didn't phone. Maybe that wouldn't've been appropriate, he didn't think, for something so serious. But, anyhow, I heard him leave the house. And I remember thinking that he'd gone insane, really crazy."

"Look at the press section," Flournoy grated. "They can *hear* her. They're hearing every word, every goddamn word."

"And then, because I'd cried so much, and hurt so bad, I pushed the shoes out of the way on the floor of the closet, and I

went to sleep. And the next thing I knew, I was awake, and trying to understand where I was, and what'd happened, and who was calling to me, calling out my name, like they were scared for me. And then I realized that it was the sheriff that was calling for me. So I hollered back, and they let me out. It was still dark outside—it was in the wee hours. And—" Her voice fell, hushed by the pain of distant recall. Gripping the pulpit with both hands, looking squarely at the nearest of the three cameras, she spoke softly, without inflection. "And they told me that my daddy was dead, that he'd been killed while he was walking to town, along the path that led through the fields. He'd been hit in the head—hit in the head and robbed. And right away, I knew what had happened. So I went to Austin, the first chance that I got, and I told him that I knew Mitchell had killed my daddy. Of course, Austin never let on, never admitted that I was right. But he didn't deny it, either. He just never answered me, and never talked about it, ever again. And I was pregnant, even though I didn't know it then, and so Austin married me. I don't think he would've done it, married me, if it hadn't been that I was pregnant. Because I could see, just looking in his eyes, that he was already tired of me. But maybe he was thinking about what I'd said, about how my daddy died. Maybe he was worried about what I'd say if he left me."

As the choir began to sing, loud in the speaker, the director turned to face Flournoy. "Let's cut away from Holloway. He sees the red light on the camera, but he doesn't know the sound's off. There're no lights to show whether the sound's off. He's getting uptight."

"Of course he knows the sound's off. The fucking choir's singing," Flournoy flared.

"But—"

"And his expression's okay. Still okay. He looks like he's taking her confession, for Christ's sake."

"But—"

"Give it a few more seconds," Flournoy ordered. "Then cut to the choir. I'll tell you when."

* * *

"So we got married. We left town, and we got married, up in Chicago. And it was just about then that Austin started in radio, and then later in TV. And before any of us really knew what was happening, Austin was famous. There's five years' difference between Gloria and Elton. But by the time Elton was born, Austin was famous, or at least getting famous. And I was glad for him, too. Even though we'd grown apart, and never saw much of each other, except sometimes when he'd come to me in the dark, into my bed, I was glad for him. And, of course, all that time, I tried not to think about my daddy, and about how he died. And I tried not to think about Elton, either. Because Elton—" She drew a deep, measured breath and dropped her eyes to the pulpit, to the purse she now held with both hands. Almost inaudibly, still with her eyes lowered, staring at the purse, she said, "Elton was never really right. Even when he was little, just a little child, he was always a stranger. Sometimes, to myself, I'd call him my little stranger, and I'd pray that he'd be all right. I—" She shook her head, tightened her fingers on the purse. "I didn't think I had a right to ask God for more than that, because of why my father died, how he wouldn't've died except for me, except for what I did when I was sixteen with Austin.

"But that prayer was never answered, because Elton was never normal. I can say that now. I've got to say it now. That's why I'm here, what I'm going to do . . ." As she spoke, she turned to face her husband, still standing a few feet away. His face, she saw, was pale as death. And his mouth was twisted into a death's-head smile. Did he seem to be shrinking inside his clothes, shriveling to the size of an ordinary man?

"Look at Holloway," Friedman whispered. "He's *green*."

Sitting far forward in his chair, his eyes intently fixed on Marvella's face, Hastings made no reply.

"Cut," Flournoy hissed. "*Cut to the choir.*"

* * *

"The truth is," Marvella was saying, still facing her husband, "that Elton was insane. He was always insane, probably. But when he got close to twenty, he got worse, much worse. And it had to do with—with sex. It started when Elton would begin by preaching to prostitutes on the streets, or wherever, then end up shouting at them and beating them. Once he was badly beaten himself by one of their pimps. We thought Elton would lose an eye that time. And I remember thinking, then, that maybe he'd stop, because of the beating. And he did stop, too. At least we—we thought he'd stopped. But then the—the prostitutes started to die. They were strangled. At first I—I didn't believe that it was Elton. I still can't believe it was Elton, even though I know, really, that he did it, killed those women. But the police never came, never asked about Elton, about the killings. Not until—" She broke off, took her eyes from the sickly spectacle of her husband's face, looked reflectively down at the purse. As if they were a stranger's fingers, part of a stranger's hand, she saw her fingers working at the clasp, opening the purse. And now her voice, too, was a stranger's:

"Not until just this last Wednesday," she was saying, "did the police come. And then, the next day, Lloyd started following Elton, wherever he went—"

—as the fingers closed around the cold steel of Austin's revolver—

"—just like Lloyd followed my daddy, all those years ago—"

—as, yes, the revolver was free of the purse, coming up to chest level—

"*Christ!*" On his feet, Hastings drew his revolver, raised the weapon. Shouting, "*Hold it,*" as the sights steadied, lined up on Marvella's chest. "*Hold it!*"

Beside him, above the sudden frenzy of hysterical voices Friedman was shouting, "Wait, Frank. *Wait. Don't.*"

Conscious of the scene's slow-motion momentum, aware that he was helpless, an actor rooted to the stage, Holloway saw the revolver—yes, his own revolver—moving inexorably toward

him, immobilizing him, impaling him, draining him of everything but fear. As it moved, the muzzle grew larger, as someone had once said it would, aimed directly at him now, with Marvella's face behind the gun. And behind Marvella's head, just to the left, he saw the camera lens. Finally, the red light had gone out—too late. More than two hundred affiliates, all of them witnesses . . .

. . . all of it consumed in a flash of blinding brightness.

Gone.

Seeing the pistol drop to the floor of the stage beside the pulpit, murmuring something that could have been a prayer of thanks, Hastings lowered his revolver, unfired.

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